

LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION, No. 88

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London Mystery



Original

No.
88

Thrilling



**THE LONDON
MYSTERY SELECTION**



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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

Stories about an organized crooked operation have their special appeal and yet when suspense and excitement are conjured up it is often just sheer human nature which is the cause. Emotions such as hate and fear with their counterparts of love and hope; envy on the one hand and greed on the other; desire to take and determination to keep—these are often the stuff from which gripping stories are woven into dramatic patterns.

If a modern "big-time" crook who wanted accomplices for a criminal operation could seek them openly through the columns headed **SITUATIONS VACANT** in periodicals, the advertisements would make interesting reading. For one reason, they would appear in scientific, technical and trade publications. For another, they would give as essential qualifications knowledge of, and experience in the use of, explosives, chemical reagents, electronics and machine tools, just as examples. In business journals the advertisements would be addressed to experts in systems, organisation and methods.

The scope for writers and readers today is immense. It can range from the use of a blunt instrument to that of a thermal lance. It can embrace a bank robber racing away in a 100 m.p.h. car, an espionage agent extricating himself from a hostile country and a woman poisoner trying to escape from her own conscience. But in every case the story is well worth the telling.

LONDON MYSTERY has the pleasure of bringing to you in each issue a selection of the best original short stories in this intriguing field. We appreciate your interest and would be grateful if you would recommend LONDON MYSTERY to your friends.

THE EDITOR.

“I’ve always wanted to be a dress designer. I used to do all my own clothes before the accident. Sometimes now I look at the fashions and I know I could do just as well. If I had my hands.”

(Sheila, 18)



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SUCH A PITY

PATRICIA BEARD

She was an attractive girl, slim yet round and bosomy!

THE GIRL in the "wet look" plastic coat looked wildly around before clambering onto the parapet and jumping into the river, a hundred feet below. She hadn't seen me, I was pretty sure. I was standing under the yews in the churchyard at the end of the bridge. The river was wide, dark and fast-flowing.

After she'd hurled herself into space she screamed. A terrible sound it was, that scream. It had everything in it. Fear, desperation, realization; all the horror of Death and the struggle of Humanity. She'd found out, poor girl, before she even hit the water that she didn't want to go after all. Too late though, for her to find that life was sweet. Because there was no one to hear her. No boats nearby, nobody about, no one but me.

I went to the spot where she'd jumped over and looked down. She was still trying to fight it—struggling and sinking, struggling and sinking. It was a harassing sight. I sighed. I'd been a strong swimmer once. It was a pity; such a pity. Her coat certainly had a "wet look" now, I thought, trying to lighten my depression.

Presently, after the disturbed water had returned to normal, I walked on over the bridge and up the hill into the little town.

It was quite a small town, rather old-fashioned. I was fond of it, having lived there all my life. I knew every dark, poorly lit street and every fly-blown little shop window. Still, it was growing and expanding fast these days, stretching its boundaries to accommodate its growing population, much of which was imported from the big cities. There were two new estates on the outskirts and a whole street of new shops which the Council had proudly named the "Town Centre". Although, to their chagrin the older inhabitants persisted in calling the

old familiar main street "Town Centre". The girl must have come from one of the new houses, I supposed, because I hadn't recognised her. And I prided myself on knowing everyone, by sight at least, except for the newcomers.

For half an hour or so I walked around the streets watching the rush and hurry of the younger people who had done their days work and been home, eaten, changed and were now out.

"Slow down." I'd have liked to say to them. "Savour life. Don't grab at it and gobble it down so fast." But, of course I didn't. They wouldn't have taken any notice anyway.

After a while the streets were quieter again, the windows of the coffee shops and pubs rapidly steaming up. I stood, rather aimlessly, outside a cafe. Suddenly I decided to go home. The thickening drizzle didn't bother me, the elements never did. Perhaps it was seeing the girl drown that had made me want to see Judy and the children. Soon I was turning into the side road of older houses. No 39 was my home.

Home! The very word was a mockery now. The 3-bedroomed semi-detached brickbuilt house in which I had lived all my life was no longer mine. It now belonged to my wife, Judy. When Judy and I had known that Mark, our first child was on the way, my mother, a widow had made the house over to us. She'd gone to keep house for her brother, an elderly bachelor. "A furnished flat is no place to bring up a family," she'd said. "And this house is too big for one old woman anyway." Judy and I had been overjoyed. We'd modernised it, doing most of the work ourselves. And then we'd settled down to the business of living—for seven years. We'd been happy, I think. As happy as anyone is happy. After Mark we'd acquired a daughter, Mandy, a lolloping dog, Trixie and an old banger of a car.

But now everything was different. Judy and I had been separated for two years. True, we still loved each other but we knew that we could never live together again. And I didn't go to No 39 very often. I was able to visit at any time, but it was too painful. Going to the house, seeing her and the children. The might-have-been, the shared life we could have gone on

having, the growing old together. It all hurt too much. But tonight I was determined to see them all—even though it did turn the knife in the wound.

The children were already in bed and Judy was not alone. There was a neighbour with her, and they were chatting over their knitting and their coffee cups the way women do. Judy was looking older. My heart ached for the grey strands in her hair and the new little worry lines between her brows.

Both she and the neighbour seemed quite unmoved by my presence, and after a while I went up to the children's bedrooms. They were both asleep. On the table beside Mandy's bed a night light burned in a saucer. Presumably she was still nervous and afraid of the dark. No wonder. A fatal road crash isn't a pleasant thing for a child to be involved in. At the age of five, Mandy although physically unharmed had seen things that no child should see. She'd had nightmares ever since.

I stood watching, first her and then Mark for a long while. It calmed me down somehow. The heavy depression lifted and when I left, down the stairs and through the hall, I felt better. Those two, my stakes in the future, they were going to be all right. Fine specimens both of them. I didn't go back to the lounge to see Judy. What was the use!

Even the weather had cleared up outside. The streets still gleamed wetly but the rain and fog had gone. I retraced my steps to the other side of town. At one point I passed a young woman, dressed in the shortest of mini-coats. Since she was a stranger to me I concluded she must be another of the town's newcomers. She was an attractive girl, slim yet rounded and bosomy. As we passed she nodded and smiled in a friendly way. I was unprepared and completely astonished that she should have noticed me. I knew that this could happen but it never had, yet, not to me anyway. Standing there, shaken and shattered, I looked after her as she disappeared into the night; neat little bottom, flashing long legs and carelessly swinging handbag. Almost forgotten feelings assailed me. I grinned to myself as I made my way back to the churchyard. Sometimes, I mused, just sometimes, I wish I weren't dead.

PLASTIC HORROR

HUGH ORFORD

*Something about them
makes me shudder . . .*

Illustrated by Oriol Bath

I WISH I'd never known Axel Carenth. I wish I'd never set eyes on his plastic miniatures. In fact, I'd give a fortune not to have returned to London the year he died. That last night of his life fixed itself indelibly on the backcloth of my consciousness. I shall never sleep peacefully again.

When Axel's name first hit the headlines I recalled I'd been at school with him. He'd been artistic and insufferable. Now, famous as a plastic surgeon, he was holding a one-man show of superb figure moulding at the Sincombe Galleries.

His figures created quite a vogue and society gossip writers tended to fawn over them. The worst that critics could find to say of them was that they were true to life. Having time on my hands I went along.

The figures were housed in two large glass cases alone in the great hall and it was only with the greatest difficulty that I was able to push my way through the crowd. It was an amazing crowd with lots of the usual talk. Yet it was strange how the retreating undertow passed out silent in a way hard to understand. Near the cases snatches of conversation caught my ear.

"Perfectly bewildering. . . ."

"Simply shattering, darling. . . ."

"Something about them makes me shudder—must be the eyes."

"They're grue, dear—perfectly grue—like seeing yourself in the glass without make-up."

Had the insufferable Axel really infused his work with his

own distasteful personality? I shuffled forward, recalling how his manner had kept us poles apart. His brother Rudolph had been far more human. They'd grown up together, to the outer world close friends, yet, when Axel married Magda, a Hungarian dancer of staggering beauty, they'd drifted apart.

Knowing Axel's ability I had no doubt but that his plastics would be outstanding. Yet, when at last I drew near, their effect made me gasp. These were not models—they were magic. I found myself thinking, "They'll speak—any minute . . . They'll come out of the cases, walk away, carry on living and laugh at us looking at them."

There were in all about two dozen, all between eighteen inches and two feet in height. Some where clothed, some draped,



one a glorious nude. Yet they had the astonishing effect of making me feel afraid. I felt a complete fool about it, yet, all the time I was convinced that I was looking at something obscene and horrible. I turned to get out as fast as I could.

A sudden movement and stir stopped me. A woman shrieked and was struggling to get nearer the cases. "My husband!" she shrieked. "That—that's my husband. . . . There, that one—that in the corner. . . . Oh, my God, won't anyone help me?"

She looked terribly agitated. Those near by tried to calm the poor soul but her anguish was uncontrollable. By now she was indicating a figure on the right. It was that of a typical businessman, the sort that daily commutes from Woking to Town, hunches over a desk, a weekend golf and fortnight holiday type.

She thrust forward, trying to smash the glass with her fists. The crowd acted typically—some murmured, a few close by appeared helpfully interested, most seemed shocked and embarrassed. Me, I felt useless so I drifted towards an exit . . . I'd had enough emotion for one day.

By the door, looking as if he was enjoying every moment, stood Axel, tall immaculate, sneering and sardonic. I don't think he recognized me, he was too taken up with savouring the stir his figures were creating.

Newspapers quickly seized on the story. The man had disappeared six months before: his wife had done all she could to trace him. His firm knew nothing of him since he walked out of the office with a lunch voucher in his hand. Photographs confirmed her statement that the figure was that of her husband.

Axel treated the whole affair with contumely. It was typical, he said of the gutter press, eager for sensation because it sold news. He invited reporters to his laboratory and showed them his plastic in all its stages. "See, gentlemen, my material," he said. "Of course it looks like human flesh—and why not? Who more likely than the experimental surgeon to make discoveries? Do you want to limit scientific research because it makes a few silly women squeamish? Principles of cellular structure are of vital importance to us all. To be able to synthesize it is a

triumph. I shall give the world the results of my labours—one day."

Axel's arguments helped him little for public opinion ran strong against him. A small crowd tried to storm the Sincombe Galleries and after that the public lost interest and he closed the show.

It must have been about that time that I ran into his brother Rudolph. He seemed pathetically pleased to see me and accompanied me to my club. He was in London because his agents were negotiating a series of autumn piano recitals. Seven years had certainly left their mark on him, poor fellow. He was grey and his eyes looked ghastly. Still to me he was the same dear old Rudolph—until I mentioned I'd seen Axel. It knocked him sideways.

"You knew I'd broken with him?" he asked wearily.

"Had you?" I said. "I'd heard he'd married some stupendous Hungarian beauty."

He shot up and braced himself as though expecting a blow. "That's it," he exclaimed. "That's why I left Axel. I've done with him." He bent over towards me. "Steven, I just couldn't stand it any longer. . . . Marriage! It was no marriage. . . . Only a hellish plot of Axel's to further some scheme of his."

I confess I laughed. "Don't be dramatic," I urged but regretted it immediately. Beads of sweat stood on his forehead and his eyes were wild. He clutched my arm in a grip that hurt.

"You've never seen Magda—you don't know. . . . She's an angel, Steven—an angel. . . . And Axel's slowly killing her. . . . I know it."

I had heard—you know how things get round—that Axel had quite a way with women, so the marriage had caused me little surprise. Rudolph's outburst, however, gave me food for thought.

"Surely she knew what she was taking on," I protested.

He shook his head. "You're right out of the picture, Steven. Axel's not human. . . . You only see the outer casing. You—you've no idea what he's capable of. . . . His power's shattering. I've seen a man turn grey before him—moan in terror—just the

look in his eyes. . . . I have. . . . When I was a kid he'd do that sort of thing to me for the hell of it. I'd dream of Axel's eyes and wake screaming."

Overcome by his memories he gave a shudder.

"I got clear of him," he went on, "but what can that sweet girl do?"

Suddenly he swept away his despair. He held up his hands, his eyes blazing with fury. "If anything happens to her I'll kill him with these."

I calmed him down at last and we talked of other things. After that, often as I met him, I intentionally avoided any return to the subject.

It must have been six weeks later that Axel paid me a most unexpected visit. Such a shock it was I confess my heart beat quicker than it should. When I entered the room Axel was holding my loveliest—and latest—jade in his hands. Regardless of my entrance he continued his scrutiny for a full minute, bland and unperturbed. When he looked up he ignored my outstretched hand but bowed slightly and unsmilingly.

"Good morning Mr. Mattocks," he drawled, his index finger still caressing my jade. "A connoisseur, I see. . . . I admire your taste—I covet your collection. How satisfying to be able to surround yourself with the rewards of travel."

I was reminded of his brother's words for his eyes burned like flames.

"My jades are surely not the sole object of your visit," I remarked lamely.

"Hardly—though I am pleased to have seen them." His lips curled. "You are friendly with my young, most emotional brother, I think. He has mentioned you."

I nodded, shaken with a peculiar consternation. "I have been—er—in the past. Only since my return have I met him on odd occasions."

He put down the jade and moved nearer, catlike and ominous. "You have influence with my brother—still, I know." His voice sank, silky and cold. His lean, handsome face changed, the skin tautened till it seemed that I was staring into a skull

with lambent eyes in its sockets. Involuntarily I stepped back.

"My brother takes an unwarranted interest in my domestic affairs," he continued. "He has been audacious enough to interfere between my wife and me. As my brother's close friend you will give him timely warning."

His long, sensitive fingers curled and cupped as he spoke. His glances burned till I felt blanched. His lips hardly moved.

"Put your useless, petty life to some purpose for once, Mr. Mattocks," he sneered. "For the sake of his adoring public, strengthen your arguments, Mr. Mattocks. It would be a sin to rob the world of his great musical talents."

His face relaxed. I was moved to protest. "Surely, Mr. Carenth," I said, "such advice should come rather from you."

His finger pointed at me—spear like—and his voice purred. "Our relationship makes that impossible—so—argument is needless. . . . I am telling you, Mr. Mattocks to take the initiative. You understand me clearly. . . . Good morning, Mr. Mattocks."

He turned, his hand fluttered caressingly over my jade and he was gone. I wiped my brow and collapsed into the nearest chair.

For days I teetered between decisions. In the end I did nothing for fate took the bit between her teeth. Carenth's wife left him. The first I knew of it was when Rudolph came to see me in a state akin to collapse.

"Poor, poor child," he said brokenly. "She's come to me, Steven. . . . She has not a soul in the world—and she's all in. God knows what Axel's done to her. She's a wraith and her eyes are as if she's been through hell. She cowers at the slightest sound."

He paced the room as he spoke and it was as though his spirit writhed in anguish. "What am I to do, Steve—what am I to do? I just can't think."

I did some thinking for him. "There's my cottage in Hampshire, Rudi—it might serve for the time being. . . . My housekeeper's a motherly old soul. She'd welcome the chance of taking care of Magda, I'm sure."

He jumped at the offer, was off like a shot and I made what

arrangements were necessary. From then on I heard nothing for a month. Rumour had it that Carenth had wiped clean his engagement book and had closed both house and consulting rooms. It was said he had been seen creeping from shop to shop buying up old fashioned beads. Pigmy figures similar to his occasionally appeared in side shows at fairs with a tattered, lean, vulpine creature in cloak and mask.

One night up at Doncaster crowds attacked the show. They beat up the guardian and fired his booth. Next day ashes revealed only a handful of glass beads.

It was about then that the police issued a warrant for Carenth's arrest. Comparisons between photographs of missing people and his plastic figures had revealed startling similarities and Scotland Yard wanted his help. An inspector called to see me.

"Mr. Mattocks, you know Axel Carenth, I believe?" he said.

"We were at school together," I answered.

"When did you last see him?"

"About six weeks ago in this room."

"Know where he is now?"

"No."

"Would you recognize him, shall we say, under any circumstances?"

While I paused to consider this question the inspector took a photo from his wallet and handed it to me. It was of the man who had been beaten up at Doncaster.

"Is that Axel Carenth?"

"It might be," I answered hesitantly. "I'd know if I could see the eyes."

The inspector stood up. "Right, Mr. Mattocks," he said briskly. "I should be grateful if you would hold yourself in readiness. We may require you for identification purposes."

A week later Rudolph disappeared. An hour before his first performance at the Wedmore Hall he had left his hotel and just vanished into the blue. Twelve hours too late the police traced his taxi. At the Hall he had alighted, another car had drawn up

beside it, there had been a signal from it. Seconds later he had leapt into it and it had been driven off at speed.

I phoned Scotland Yard but the inspector was out and there was no knowing when he would be back. I knew every moment must be precious, yet I seemed helpless. After half an hour of indecision I phoned Magda, something I should have done before all else.

I introduced myself. Her voice, with its mere breath of accent, was soft and warm.

"I haven't seen Rudolph for two days," I said, softening the blow.

I heard a gasp; there was a brief pause then, "I 'ave thought—terrible t'ings. . . . He have not write—an' he write me ev'ry day. Mr. Mattocks, please—I *mus'* know. Tell me—he—he is not safe?"

What was the use of hiding it? "Rudolph has disappeared." I said simply and told her all I knew.

"I will come immediate," she said incisively. "Listen. Meet me at Paddington one hour—one and half hour time. . . . Yes, I know where 'e is, I tell you. . . . How long you say he go? Two day? Perhaps we safe 'im yet. . . . I don' know. We *mus'* try. . . . Oh God, the poor Rudi!"

With a sob she replaced the receiver.

A mist descended at dusk and a cold, drizzling rain emptied the streets. Magda was there when I arrived. Though obviously distraught, she could still radiate a breath-taking charm that drew every eye to her.

"Mr. Mattocks, 'ave you keep the taxi?" she exclaimed "By now Rudi may be dead—dead so 'orribly. I 'ave tell the police what I know. . . . Now we 'urry."

She stamped her foot at my involuntary pause.

"Don' 'esitate, my frien'. There is one reason for 'is disappearance—Axel. Of course 'e is in danger—mortal danger. Axel will—Oh, my God——"

She seized my arm and we almost ran for the entrance. When she told the driver to take us to Harley Street I gasped. Magda turned on me.

"Where else should my 'usband be? Your police go 'untin' 'im north, south, east and west, Rudi tell me, and Axel, he fool them. . . . No, I give no number. It is better we walk to the 'ouse."

She sat forward on the seat, her face a translucent mask in the light of passing street lamps. I touched her ice-cold hand in mute sympathy.

"See," she exclaimed as we entered Harley Street, "I say he will be there. Stop the taxi."

A minute streak of light showed momentarily at an upper window of a house as if a draught had disarranged a thick curtain. We left the taxi and walked the short distance. Magda still had a key and we entered silently. A minute before I had felt frozen but now I found myself trembling like a leaf and perspiration rolled off me. Heroics were never in my line. Thoughts of Carenth made a woeful coward of me. I gripped Magda's hand and crept after her into the darkness. She found the stairs and we slowly ascended.

Suddenly light tattered the dark. Magda uttered a strangled scream. I froze, heart beating a tattoo. A door opened and, gun in hand, Carenth came to the head of the stairs. He was haggard, unshaven, not even clean, but his eyes burned madly.

"So—my undutiful wife has returned," he murmured silkily, "I calculated that the disappearance of my inestimable brother would fetch her. . . . And Mr. Mattocks too! Really I am honoured."

He stood aside and waved us forward with his habitual courtesy. Though her eyes never left him, Magda continued to grip my hand. She seemed helpless, without will, mesmerized, like a rabbit charmed by a weasel. His eyes still smiled, but the hand on the gun was rock-like.

We entered a laboratory and Carenth locked the door behind us. It was an enormous room, the curtained window to our left, opposite a white cabinet with a marble slab raised before it. Around the walls ranged shelves of bottles, bunsens and test tubes. Close by stood a table on which a set of delicate surgical instruments was arrayed.

"My workshop, Mr. Mattocks," purred Carenth, his eyes flicking from Magda to me. "You are in time to witness my master effort, culmination of my life's work. It is going to be made the sweeter by my wife's timely assistance."

Magda leapt for him, teeth set, face white with rage. "Never, Axel, never . . . I will not," she raged at him. "I would die rather."

His smile never relaxed. "You will, Magda, you will help me—now—and willingly." His eyes became lambent flames, holding her till she sank shuddering to the floor.

Then he switched their power on me. "Sit there, Mr. Mattocks," he commanded. "You can do nothing. If you call no one will hear. Soon, when you have witnessed my skill I will grant you a favour. Your useless shell will be my last miniature."

He began releasing the great locking bars of the cabinet. "Come, Magda," he ordered as the doors swung open, "help me lift out our beloved Rudolph."

With dragging steps she crept forward; once near he made her thrust in her hands and together they drew out a long, shrouded figure and stretched it on the marble slab. Suddenly Magda broke into long, agonising, heart-rending screams. Tearing the coverings from the body she flung herself on it, sobbing and shuddering.

"Dead! Dead! Dead!" she wailed.

He dragged her brutally away and let her fall again to the floor. "Your memory plays you tricks, dear wife," he sneered. "You know he is not dead. Surely you remember the little bank clerk. When his heart gave out we could do nothing with him. Most embarrassing, you remember, getting rid of the body."

While he spoke he was filling a needle.

"Rudolph must be warmed—the heart must have stimulation. Let me recall our hideous results in partial contraction before we learned artificially to increase the heart's temporary action."

He bent over and thrust the needle into her arm.

"There," he said, "that will arouse your appreciative powers."

In a matter of minutes Magda had risen to her feet. No longer the shrinking, horrified witness, she now appeared ready to become Axel's willing assistant. With cheeks flushed, lips full and red, eyes glinting madly, she began hovering over the frozen figure as ghoulishly as he.

His satisfaction complete, Carenth was prepared to be magnanimous. On impulse he took down a glass jar from a near-by shelf.

"I should have explained, Mr. Mattocks, that I have had till now one insuperable difficulty. Eyes have always defeated every effort at reduction."

Sick with horror I drew back as he thrust the jar close to my face. It was full of human eyes. The monster chuckled.

"I've used twice that number in vain experiment. Still, yesterday I achieved success. So—our dear, artistic Rudolph will not need beads or boot buttons. It would have been so degrading for him."

I never knew what they did to Rudolph's body. Suffice it that after what seemed hours Carenth held up before me, on a slab running with blood, a diminutive figure that had once been his brother. Behind him, almost unrecognisable, stood Magda, blood-stained, pale and wild-eyed.

"Success at last," crowed Carenth. "See Magda, the eyes are perfect! You have witnessed the first complete reduction of the hu—"

He never finished for a loud hammering at the door below interrupted his eulogy. He dropped the body and whirled on me, madness distorting his face.

"You have brought the police on me, you—you—. You won't escape me—not now. You shall die with me."

"He will not die, Axel."

It was Magda. She was holding a gun—his gun—and her hand never wavered. "Yes, Axel, the police are here. I tell them to come."

Body twitching, blood all drained from his sallow face, he

watched the gun. I moved uneasily and stood up.

"Stay still Mr. Mattocks," she warned me without moving an eyelid, "there is still somet'ing to be done. Axel, make ready the injections. Quick, I say, or I shoot, an' hell get you too quick."

Carenth picked up the needles and filled them slowly—slowly. A crash sounded below as the door gave way and feet pounded on the stairs. Magda's gun remained steady.

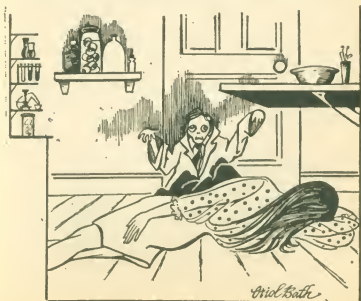
"Now inject yourself," she snapped.

A fearful spasm passed over his face. Her finger tightened on the trigger. He collapsed on to his knees.

"No—no," he shrieked in a voice hardly human. "I can't—I can't—I tell you I won't."

Magda closed on him. "Do it," she said, her eyes pinpoints of hate. "Do it, or I will."

He dropped the needles, rose to his feet and rushed for the



door, searching frantically in his pocket for the key.

"It is no good, Axel. I took it from your pocket," she told him. Then, while he pounded the panels in vain she calmly picked up the needles and thrust first one, then the other, into his neck.

He gave a violent shudder, lost all power of movement and sank down, twitching and slaving. At that moment the police were at the door and Maga, sure now of her revenge, turned the gun on herself.

As if that were not enough of horror I now had to watch Carenth's last moments. While yet he lived, his agony must have been unimaginable for, without preliminary freezing, what he had inflicted scientifically on others was now, in a matter of seconds, coursing through his own veins with all its accompanying torments.

He contracted speedily so that in his place lay a loathsome, wrinkled, mummy-like abomination around which tumbled the clothes he had been wearing. At first only his skull remained human in size but, as the hair fell from it, it too grew small save that the teeth forced out the jaws in an awful gorilla-like grimace.

From it great goggling eyes, still shot with terror, slowly globulated as the sockets became too small to contain them. As the last particle of life fled shuddering, they slid down a fold in the clothing and rolled to where lay Magda's body.



“REVENGE OF THE NETSUKE CARVER”

JOHN F. RICE

Yan Ko gritted his teeth and closed his eyes as . . .

Illustrated by Buster

AS WAS the custom Nok Gan changed his name when he reached the age of majority. From now on he would be known as Yan Ko, and he could now take his revenge for the loss of his father's thumbs.

His father had been one of the leading netsuke carvers of Kyoto, skilled and cunning in his craft. His speciality had been ivory carvings with moveable parts. Yan Ko adjusted his kimono and threaded an ivory netsuke fashioned as a basket with loose rocks in it carved out of one piece of ivory; one of his father's. The netsuke had a cord threaded through it which dropped behind his sash and had a narrow box suspended from it—and inro—containing small personal items. The netsuke prevented it from falling.

He put money into his sleeve pockets with strong yet delicate fingers, paid homage to the household shrine of the fox god, and set out to organise the making of the boxes.

His first call was at the workroom of an inro maker. Yes, boxes such as he described and sketched could be made. The second call was at the maker of metal netsuke. Regretably, it was not possible to produce such a clumsy device as the honourable gentleman required. No amount of cajoling, pleading as the son of a very good friend who had received humiliating and frustrating injuries, or acting could persuade the maker of metal netsuke. Yan Ko tried others with the same result and was much perplexed.

Instead of eating at mid-day he gave the price of a meal to

an old and wrinkled beggar, and went to the shrine of the fox god and prayed. "Oh deity, please grant me the wisdom and cunning to avenge my father. Ten years ago he was the leading netsuke carver of Kyoto. Every daimio sought his original, clever and entertaining creations. Most persistent among them was Yiminki the great samurai who desired a netsuki incorporating a feature which had never before been attempted. My honoured father strove to satisfy him and finally did with a netsuke of Quoshi the demon queller, with moveable mask underneath which was Yiminki's face, and sword loose in its scabbard which could be practically but not completely withdrawn by the movement of Quoshi's arm. It was all carved from a single piece of ivory and only my father knows the secret of how he carved the curved moveable sword.

So that none of the other nobles should emulate him Yiminki cut off my father's thumbs and settled a fortune on him so that we need never want.

Oh deity, my father must be revenged. If it were not for me and his other pupils I am sure that he would have put an end to his life long ago. He lives only to teach his son his skills."

Yan Ko left the shrine to seek inspiration elsewhere, passing among women with elaborate hair styles, wooden shoes, and brightly-coloured kimonos. Business men sported matching netsuki, ojime and inro or tobacco pouches as a sign of their affluence or importance. Buddhists wore their hair in a fan like style at the back, and carried a brush with which to sweep the ground before them as they walked so that they would not kill even an insect. Sellers of porcelain netsuke offered caricatures of buddhists with tongues which popped out of their mouths in insulting fashion.

He walked into a massuers to relax. As his nerves and muscles became soothed, Yan Ko looked at the massuer's blind eyes and—what a fool he'd been, how blind, of course that was the solution. Business men and buddhists had their vanities, and so had samurai. It would be fitting to have the metal part made by a maker of swords.

Yan Ko visited the workshop of an ordinary but skilled



craftsman. They agreed a price and he left his drawings for the swordmaker to work from.

He completed his business with a call at a lacquerer's and was satisfied.

Yan Ko patiently whiled away the next month carving a crouched skeleton netsuke—lucky to gamblers and therefore easy to sell. Though he knew that he would need good luck in his gamble.

He visited the swordmaker to examine what had been made. The two strong blades were pulled apart and set. Yan Ko pushed two sticks down between the blades and jumped when they sprang together. The sticks were each about as thick as a

thumb and were nearly severed. Yan Ko paid the swordmaker and commissioned another one stronger and sharper, and ordered him to destroy the prototype.

During the next month he carved a monkey netsuke, the monkey being one of the signs of the zodiac, is a lucky charm—especially during childbirth—and Yan Ko's brainchild was in the process of being born.

The next trap that Yan Ko set off, for such it was, the sticks were severed, and he was well satisfied. He took it to the maker of inro for a puzzle box to be made to fit round it, together with a plate of metal of similar weight to be put in an identical box.

He returned to his home to carve a kappa, a water imp, with his foot trapped in a clam. One day while he was carving it his father approached him. "My son, I have heard disturbing news."

"What is that my father?" Yan Ko watched as his parent used his fingers like crab's pincers to tug at his narrow curling beard.

"It is said that you have commissioned the making of a trap." Yan Ko remained silent. This news left him speechless anyway.

"If you think to avenge the loss of my thumbs, reconsider. They are as nothing to the loss of my son, and Yiminki is more cunning than the fox."

His father bowed, Yan Ko returned his courtesy, and his father left him.

Yan Ko went to the household shrine of the fox god. "Please help me deity, as my father guesses at my intention so might word have got to Yiminki, and he is indeed cunning."

Yan Ko finished his kappa netsuke at the same time that both finished boxes were decorated in bright lacquers. He practised with them and then set out to visit Yiminki.

Yan Ko gave the servant the kappa netsuke as a gift for one of Yiminki's children. This was accepted with courtesy and Yan Ko was obliged to accept a gift in return with equal

courtesy.

Yan Ko next bestowed the gift of a monkey netsuke to Yiminki's wife. This was returned with grace. "If it had been carved of narwhal tusk it would have fulfilled a medicinal function, but the properties peculiar to the monkey might now be more useful to a member of the donor's family, but the offer was much appreciated."

Yan Ko sent in one of his boxes next with an invitation to solve the puzzle of how to open it. This time he was invited to attend the tea ceremony with Yiminki. Yan Ko felt his patience being tried but exerted the utmost self-control. After the ceremony Yiminki and Yan Ko sat cross-legged opposite each other. Yan Ko was very conscious of Yiminki's masculinity. The samurais knot of hair and drooping thin moustache, and coarse hairy hands made strong by wielding his most precious possession, his beautiful sword.

"The box intrigues me, but to what purposes may it be put?"

"It is original lord Yiminki, and is to contain personal items or valuables: only the person who knows the secret can open it."

"Did you make it?"

"No lord Yiminki, but it was made by three separate craftsmen for me and only I know the secret." Yan Ko unwound a cloth from its twin. "I know how my lord is pleased with the unique, and I am prepared to sell the pair." He put it beside the first. Yiminki compared them, examined them and bared his teeth showing his obvious satisfaction: he agreed to buy. They haggled over the price but all the time Yan Ko kept his eye on the second box. When they had agreed the price, Yan Ko agreed it on condition that he reveal the secret of how to open the boxes in strictest privacy. In Japan no servant would dream of interrupting his master unless it was absolutely convenient, and for this purpose spy holes are everywhere. Yiminki understood what Yan Ko meant. He called for and buckled on a short sword and lead the way to the garden. Yan Ko carried the boxes. They made their way across stepping

stones over the pool immediately surrounding the house, through a sand and rock garden of meditation to a shallow artificial cave. Again they sat cross-legged opposite each other on the sandy floor. Yan Ko set the first box in front of Yiminki and the second in front of himself.

"I will show my lord how to open the boxes step by step. May I humbly suggest that my lord follows my actions with this box by doing likewise with the box now before him. But first a short prayer to my god."

Yiminki bowed his head in approval.

Yan Ko leaned his head forward until it nearly touched his legs and listened intently. He heard nothing and after a suitable time raised his head.

He sensed Yiminki watching him intently as his eyes rested on the box in front of him. There was a low narrow rib of sand running beside the base of the box.

Yan Ko shuffled.

Yiminki smiled slowly. "Shall we commence?"

Yan Ko nodded courteously and said, "First press the faces of the little boy on opposite sides of the box simultaneously." He did this and a round wooden plug sprang free and projected from the front.

Yiminki did the same.

"Now remove the plug entirely." Yan Ko withdrew it, "and place your forefinger inside and press."

This action resulted in a thin lid springing free from the top of the box.

Yiminki followed suit.

The lid revealed the main body of each box both with two circular holes.

"The final action," said Yan Ko, "is to settle the thumbs, one each into the holes and gently pull apart. This will reveal the secret of each box."

"Show me," said Yiminki.

"I am my lord's humble servant," said Yan Ko, beginning to perspire, "the lord is greater than the servant. After you if you please."

Yiminki drew his short sword, "Oh no. We both know I exchanged the boxes when you prayed. Put in your thumbs and show me."

"Please, my lord," pleaded Yan Ko, "I have decided not to sell my boxes. They are not for sale. I will take them away."

"Not, Yan Ko, until you have shown me how you open that box," pointed Yiminki, "or by the fox god I swear I will cut off your thumbs with my sword just as I did your father's."

"You know!" gasped Yan Ko.

"Swordmakers talk Yan Ko, and no one has forgotten what I did to Nok Gan's father."

Yan Ko sat dejected. "Grant me one last favour my lord."

"What is that?"

"That you will open your box when I have opened mine, that I may tell my father that I almost succeeded."

Yiminki shrugged, "if it is a consolation to you."

"You promise?"

"On my word."

Yan Ko gritted his teeth and closed his eyes as he inserted his thumbs. His shriek echoed in the cave and he writhed on his face, alternately screaming and moaning.

Yiminki roared with laughter, and sheathed his sword.

After a while Yan Ko turned his face sideways and breathing heavily gasped, "Your promise."

Still laughing, Yiminki picked up the box. "There," he said, and thrust his thumbs in. There was a dull sound like a butcher cleaving rib chops.

The box fell and Yiminki looked in shocked disbelief at the bloody stumps. He roared with rage and snatched at his sword, but his fingers alone would not grip.

Yan Ko quietly put down the box and showed his thumbs. "There is only one honourable action remaining for a samurai who cannot wield a sword."

He took Yiminki's short sword and held it straight before him. He prayed as Yiminki impaled himself on it.

"Oh deity, thank you, for only the fox god could give me more cunning than the fox!"

DOWN IN THE SUBURBS

RICHARD SULLIVAN

*He eventually found the box wedged behind the
cistern in the roof*

HENRY PARSONS folded his Sunday newspaper, placed it by his plate, stirred his second cup of coffee and said: "I see he's been at it again."

"Who has been at *what* again?" his wife said, looking over tops of glasses, rim of cup and edge of paper.

"Fellow doing the murders," Mr Parsons said, crossing his legs and preparing to smoke his pipe. "Did in number six last night."

"Henry, I really don't think I want to discuss it at my own breakfast table, thank you. Besides, how do you know it's the same person?"

"All the hallmarks, my dear," Mr Parsons said. "All the hallmarks." He picked up the matches and shook the box before opening it. Mrs Parsons winced. "Can't understand why they haven't caught the fellow," he said. "Could do better myself."

"Oh, now really, Henry."

"No 'oh now really Henry' about it," Mr Parsons said. "What have you? Six very similar women—shouldn't take a psychologist long to tell us what *kind* of fellow to look for."

"How do you mean, Henry, *similar*?"

"Similar, my dear. Middle-middle-class, middle-aged, middle income. Stout. Might be a description of you, my dear."

Mrs Parsons closed her eyes. "Stout, Henry, is neither kind *nor* accurate."

"The missing articles, too," Mr Parsons said, checking them off on his fingers with his pipe stem. "A ring, a brooch, a bracelet, a pearl necklace, a pendant and now, this last one, Mrs Crawford, a chunky steel brooch. Should be a clue there somewhere."

"I have no doubt that the police have noticed it, Henry. They do have a certain experience."

"Pleased to hear it, my dear." Mr Parsons looked around the room. "Where's young George this morning?"

"He's gone over to the Byrons. He often does."

"Before breakfast?"

"You know George, Henry."

"On the contrary, my dear. I don't know George at all. Never have. A great mistake having him so late in life."

* * *

"Curious business," Mr Parsons told Gregory. "These murders, I mean."

"Not *so* curious, old boy."

"What do you think? Some young hooligan?"

"Not a *hooligan* necessarily," Gregory said. "You've noticed the similarities?"

"Mentioned them to Eleanor only yesterday."

"And their ages, of course. Motherly figures, you see. Seems as if some young chap is busy murdering his mother."

"Kind of mother substitute?"

"Exactly, old boy. And look at the missing items. One from each body. Obvious symbolism there. This chap's taking something back he feels he's been robbed of."

"Affection, I expect," Mr Parsons said. "Very fashionable to be deprived of affection nowadays."

"A possibility, old boy."

"But what baffles me, you see," Mr Parsons said, "is doesn't this young fellow ever let slip what he's been up to? Can't keep a thing like that dark for ever."

"Chap may not even know he's been up to anything," Gregory said. "Might be a dissociative personality. Wouldn't know a damned thing what nastiness he'd been up to."

"What personality, old man?"

"Dissociative, old boy."

"Is that credible?"

"Quite credible."

"We're none of us safe, then?"

"Indeed not."

"Good Lord, it might be young George—or your young Cyril."

"A possibility, old boy."

"Noticed anything odd about young George lately?" Mr Parsons asked his wife.

"What do you mean, Henry, *odd*?"

"Odd. Been acting strangely or anything. Appear distracted, that kind of thing?"

"Certainly not, Henry. Just what are you hinting at?"

"Nothing, my dear. It's just I was having a bit of a chin-wag with Gregory." Mr Parsons took out his tobacco pouch and began filling his pipe. "Good fellow, old Gregory."

"I am perfectly well aware of Gregory's virtues, Henry. What exactly were you discussing?"

"As a matter of fact—these murders. Seems the murderer may be a young fellow like George."

"Gregory did not *accuse* George, I hope?"

"Nobody accused anybody, my dear. It's just that it seems the fellow is out of our kind of drawer. Dreadful scandal, if true, of course. I'd have to resign from the Golf Club."

"Well, I think it's disgusting, discussing it so cold-bloodedly."

"Not cold-blooded, my dear. One has to be realistic in these matters. Dangerous young fellow, whoever he is."

"You sound as though you positively *want* it to be George."

"Not at all, my dear. Just a rational discussion."

"Well, I don't wish to hear another word about it, Henry."

"Of course not, my dear. Quite understandable. But if he were—just *if* he were—problem would be: could we turn him in?"

"Not another word, Henry."

All the same thoughts persisted with Mr Parsons to the extent that, one evening when both his wife and son were out, he searched the boy's room, cupboards, wardrobe and the

part of the attic reserved for George's discarded belongings. He eventually found the box wedged behind the cistern in the roof. A dangerous climb, even for a young fool like George. It contained all the missing jewellery, except Mrs Crawford's chunky steel brooch.

Mr Parsons went downstairs, washing his hands in the bathroom on the way, and mixed a whisky and soda and stood filling his pipe, considering what to do. He put the pipe in his mouth, lit it, and shook out the match in the cloud of smoke and dropped it in the ashtray.

Obviously he'd have to inform the police.

Shocking scandal, though.

Probably have to leave his club as well as the Golf Club. Dreadful blow, that. Due to retire soon, as well. The club, well admit it, old man, the club's a refuge from the wife. Hard lines, that. A lifetime of respectability, too. Too unfair.

But what if we played it close to the chest? Keep it dark and have a gentle word with the boy. Be subtle and all that. If the boy's what-was-it personality knew it's been rumbled, it would stop. Surely? And as long as the murders stopped, what good would come of blighting the boy's chances? Hard lines on the boy, too. Wasn't as though he were doing it deliberately or anything. Far from it. One of these mental things they always acquit you for in the courts. Boy'd be acquitted, of course, no doubt about that. But the scandal, the scandal'd remain. I mean, if the boy's going to be acquitted, why risk the scandal? Play it close to the chest? Eh?

He got out of the chair, taking the box with him, and went to their bedroom where his small safe was embedded in the wall behind a picture of a young girl bathing. Never did like that damned picture. It was just that Eleanor liked it less. Got to have a bit of independence. He put the picture and the box on the bed, dialled the code and then took out the key. Only private place in the house, this safe. Take good care to keep it that way, too. Damned good care. The safe door was thick and heavy and when he'd heaved it open he was staring at Mrs Crawford's chunky steel brooch.

"Bovver boys" corner Toni in a riverside alley and lead her inadvertently into a dangerous adventure in which three bottles of Chianti play a prominent part. Only the bottles do not contain wine—

There is something far more deadly and terrifying in the bottles—

Debonair as ever, Toni involves herself in a game of wits on the Italian Riviera with a gang of international drug producers.

She asks herself two puzzling questions.

Why does a certain man apparently smother himself in perfume?

What does d-lysergic diethylamide smell like?

Both difficult questions when the answers might burst out of the business end of an automatic at the asking of them.

TONI SMUGGLES CHIANTI

DERWENT VALE

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

THERE is a very special quality about the night in the riverside alleys of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe—a compound of silence, watchfulness and intensity. Toni knew that quality well from close acquaintance with those sombre lanes. She had the perception of a similar quality in the monument encrusted aisles of Westminster Abbey or amongst the stark rocks of a Highland glen. It was a quality that could breed superstition in the mind—or fear. Bogles, ghosts, predatory humans—were all about that night, such was its mysterious Edgar Allan Poe quality of macabre promise.

In consequence she half expected to see Bill Sikes's ghost dangling from a chimney pot or one of the darker alleys to

erupt a gang of teenage miscreants bent on mischief, which was more probable, she decided.

The orange red glow of the street lamps, accentuating the darkness of doorways and railway arches, the sharp click-click of her heels on the pavement, a distant hum of motor bike engines—each a commonplace, but in combination sort of weird—dramatic. The “bovver boys” were out? Racing fiendishly around the streets or prowling?

Tonight they were on the prowl and they found Toni in a quiet alley.

Suddenly the distant humming became staccato and crescendo as if some high swarm of bees had been transformed into attacking fighter planes. Then, the alley was full of racketing sound and blinding glare. Toni leapt for safety to the wall of a warehouse and put her back against it.

Through the brilliant haze and the harsh engine noises jeering voices and laughter penetrated. Toni put her hands over her eyes against the glare. They ringed her with their machines, the beams of the headlights, like spears of light pinning her to the wall.

“Bovver Boys”, “skinheads”—whatever they called themselves, were tough and sometimes nasty, but they had a crude code ethics of their own. Could she make some sort of a play on this code?

“Can it, can’t you?” she screamed at them in tolerable riverside jargon. “Wot the ’ell you fink y’are wiv them bloody lights?”

Not bad, she felt, but perhaps they expected a more versatile set of expletives.

“Orl right, blokes—dim ’em!” shouted an authoritative voice behind the lights.

The lights flicked to lower intensity.

“Beat it, yer bloomin’ menaces!” yelled Toni, but in a more conciliatory voice as if she were trying to show she had no animosity towards them, but still did not want their attentions.

“Goin’ somewhere special, doll?” said the authoritative voice.

"'Ome. That's me," said Toni succinctly.

"Aw, kerm off of it! At this time, doll? It's early. We goin' to a do. Yer invited."

"No I ain't. And if yer want it stright, I'm goin' steady wiv a bloke dahn Woolwich. Gotta Sunbeam 487 an' e' does 'is ton reg'lar on the A.23. You ain't gettin' me on yer little 'Onda."

There was laughter, at this—good humoured, thank heaven!

"I knows a bloke dahn Woolwich wiv a Sunbeam. Ted—that's 'is name. That your bloke, doll?"

"'Oo yer kiddin'?" asked Toni.

She wished they would go, but they wouldn't until they had established that she was "going steady" and not merely being standoffish.

Was there such a motor bike as a Sunbeam 487? Vaguely she remembered a conversation about such a machine amongst members of her judo class. There had been some derogatory remarks too on that occasion about an "'Onda".

"Not your bloke then?" said the satirical voice behind the lights.

"You know it ain't! My bloke's Jackie Pilgrim an' 'e does 'is ton up like you does yer ole ma's sausage and mash!"

"Which 'e don't 'cos 'is ole lady can't cook!" another voice bantered.

"Come on blokes! Up the Lions! Dahn to Millwall. Married dolls ain't no good to us," decreed authority.

"Chelsea!" yelled the chorus as the machines roared and accelerated. Then they were gone and the watchful silence returned to the alley.

A dark shadow detached itself from the darker shadow. The belted short coat, the rakish narrow brimmed trilby, slim-line trousers made an ominous silhouette against lamplight. Another too frequent situation of the alleys to contend with. How she longed for the peace and solitude of her Rotherhithe cottage. The judo class had been gruelling. Some of the youngsters were becoming proficient. A pity neither Robert nor Sigimoto had been able to see her home that evening as they usually

did on these occasions.

"You put that lot straight."

The voice was cool and impersonal. Not the usual approach. He stood close, peering at her and in some way, Toni felt, he was trying to make an assessment—weighing her up, his face shadowed by the brim of his hat, but she could see a thin line of moustache and a dimpled chin.

"So?" she said indifferently.

"I've been watching you for some time. About a week."

"You gotta nerve. I must say!"

"You can turn off the act. You're no little Bermondsey tart. Kiddled the Elephant skinheads a treat you did."

She tried to see his expression, but only saw a glitter of eyes under the hat. Again, there was that hint of appraisal in the way he was staring at her.

"All right! I put on an act," she agreed.

"You go up to the West End a bit?"

So that was it she thought wryly. Evidently, he had seen Michael's or Bill's elegant car outside her door when one or the other came to take her out to dinner or a show, and was jumping to conclusions—yet there was no insinuation in his voice.

"Well?" she said in non-committal tones.

He studied her face carefully for some seconds then bluntly asked, "How would you like a trip to the Italian Riviera?"

"With you?" she asked dryly.

"No. Alone. On a package tour."

"And where do you come into it?"

She was surprised. What did he hope to gain from this odd arrangement?

"You bring me back three bottles of a special wine. If you deliver them safely there'll be a hundred quid for you."

"All that to smuggle in three bottles of wine?" she asked sardonically.

"No. You pay duty on them in the usual way. Concessional liquor is your own affair."

"I don't see . . ."

"Oh it's a cheap tour. Early season rates you know."

As if that explained a thing!

"That does not explain your three bottles of wine."

"No? Well, that's all it is. I'll give you instructions where they are to be picked up, if you're on."

"There's more than wine in the bottles."

"So what? They'll look like unopened bottles of wine, I promise you. Proper labels and so on. Customs aren't likely to open them. If they do, you say you were asked to bring them back for some bloke you met in a pub. They won't though. You don't look the type."

"What type?"

"Never mind. You just don't," he said cryptically.

She thought for a moment. There was something illegal and tricky here, without a doubt. Well, it sounded like an adventure and Toni never looked a gift adventure horse in the mouth.

She accepted.

"Right!" he said with satisfaction. "I thought you might. Now let's take a walk and I'll tell you what to do."

Two hours later Toni rang up Bill Rogerson whose apparently casual carefree life of a young man about town concealed some very devious work with a little-known branch of the Civil Service.

"Toni!" he shouted happily after a grieved and sleepy, "Hello! Rogerson here."

"Sorry, Bill! I woke you up."

"Toni, I'm delighted! Any time."

"Bill, I've been enlisted into something very tricky. Something your department might be interested in."

She told him of her encounter by the river and her subsequent acceptance of an assignment to bring back three bottles of wine for a man who was a complete stranger to her and who had no name for he had refused to give one.

"What do you make of it, Bill?" she asked in conclusion.

"I'm not sure, Toni, but I have an idea."

"Go on, Bill."

"Wine—liquid you know—suggests d-lysergic acid diethyla-

mide, don't you think so?"

"LSD in other words," laughed Toni.

"Sorry, Toni. It's—oh never mind. But you know about it?"

"Vaguely. It's a synthetic drug isn't it? Deadly?"

"Oh rather. A microscopic drop on a lump of sugar can really create a firework display in an addict's mind—and make him feel wonderful to boot. One drop costs two to three pounds. Three litre bottles full would be worth roughly a quarter of a million."

"Good heavens, Bill!"

"If it can be smuggled to America, much more."

"Where do they make the stuff?"

"Oh, illicit laboratories here and there. And they have to be good. So has the chemist. It's not easy, especially as the main ingredient, a stuff called ergotoxine, has to be smuggled out of Hungary or Czechoslovakia."

"So the three bottles could contain either LSD or ergotoxine?"

"I think it probable. If ergotoxine it could mean there's a laboratory starting up in England. Good grief, Toni, there would be enough in those three bottles to make something like £20,000,000 worth of LSD!"

"That's incredible!"

"Fortunately they don't always succeed. We have had labs. started up before. Mainly in London, but we have had tip offs from the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs and we have been able to deal with them before they got into serious production. LSD is the worst of a bad batch of synthetic drugs."

"How bad? How does it compare with cannabis for example?"

"Cannabis gives just a mild euphoria—just enough to pep up a teenage party or give a pop singer or a film star a bit of notoriety. If you want hallucinatory magnificence you take LSD. With three litres of ergotoxine a lab could make enough of it to send every teenager in the British Isles on a permanent trip, and leave plenty for export to the U.S."

"So what shall I do, Bill?"

"You find that laboratory for sure, Toni, but I can't instruct you, as you know! Can you lunch with me tomorrow—the Ritz say?"

"Of course, but why did he pick on me, Bill? And he was surely taking a risk with Customs."

"Not really. They always pick somebody like a student or a bona fide tourist. Somebody Customs won't recognise as a frequent user of any particular route. People on package tours are usually pretty respectable you know. And three bottles of wine! Why nearly every tourist brings back a bottle or two."

Next day in the stately solemnity of the Ritz luncheon room Bill told Toni what his superior in the obscure department of the Civil Service in which he worked, expected of her.

"Bill, how could that man be sure I wouldn't go to the police?"

"As you did—in a way," smiled Bill. "He would realise that possibility of course. You'll be carefully watched through Customs and if, by chance, you were caught out, your friend would not keep his appointment with you. If you get through safely you will be trailed until they are quite sure you are not being watched."

"If I'm caught they lose their bottles of ergotoxine or LSD."

"It's a gamble with big odds in their favour. If they got one bottle of ergotoxine through they would stand to make millions."

"So if it's ergotoxine—"

"You just bring it in, deliver it and we'll do the rest."

"Not very exciting!" murmured Toni dolefully.

"You'll get a hundred pounds," laughed Bill.

"But if it's LSD?"

"Find the lab if you can and report to the U.N. Commission. They will deal with it."

"That sounds better!" said Toni cheerfully.

"Now Toni—no tricks!" Bill admonished. "No lone wolf escapades up in the mountains above Bordighera or San Remo."

"As if I would," smiled Toni demurely. "And now let's discuss this and that. This for example—"

"Asperges de Laures, madame," murmured the waiter, raising the lid of the silver dish, which he had just brought to their table.

Under the linen cloth she crossed her fingers in a little heathen gesture to the gods of chance, hoping perhaps that the little propitiatory gesture might influence them to see that the bottle contained LSD as the alternative with more adventurous possibilities.

With two lists of carefully emphasised instructions—those of the "saints" and those of the "sinners" she categorised them in her mind—Toni left England some days later on the package tour in a conventional party of serious minded seekers after culture, who spoke of polytyches, frescoes and campaniles as summer tourists to the same coast would later talk of beaches, bikinis, sun and sea. And, indeed, Toni found the guide most versatile in accommodating the party with a sufficiency of the antiquities they appeared to desire so ardently.

When the inevitable "free day" for shopping arrived Toni felt a quiet exhilaration. Now for the real fun, she sighed happily and obeying "sinful" instructions hired a car in Porto Maurizio and gave the driver, a young Italian, with a disarming and frequent smile, his orders.

Toni meant to enjoy the ride and deliberately put aside thoughts of LSD for the time being. It would be a joy to look at high clouds and mountains, hillsides clothed in chestnuts, red tiled roofs in valley bottoms instead of sad, age darkened triptyches or the gloomy faces of saints peering out of age blackened canvas or wood.

They climbed leisurely the Torrente Carmagna to the village of Carmagna, through olive groves to Vasca, high and remote on the valley side, on to Pianavia with mountains all around them. Here she left the car telling the driver to wait for her whilst she had a look at the castle and perhaps did a little shopping.

Under the castle wall she discovered the little wine shop

where the "sinners" had said she would. It was a mere cavern of rough stone, very dimly lighted by little windows of ancient glass. Its walls were stacked with bottles from the rough tiled floor to dark beamed ceilings. A thickset heavily whiskered Italian came forward and greeted her effusively in Italian.

"Good day," said Toni in English and placed the torn half of a 500 lira note on a sturdy, roughly built table in the centre of the shop.

Without a word the other took a similar torn half-note from his wallet and placed the two side by side. They formed a perfect whole. He addressed Toni again in Italian.

"Sorry!" said Toni mendaciously in English. "Don't understand."

A voice behind her said in Italian, "She does not speak Italian, Stefano."

"She has the correct half of the note, Gregorio."

"Then she is the courier and yet, Stefano, this girl intrigues me. She is not what she was described to be. There is a quality about her I do not understand."



So, thought Toni, I am suspected because I have a "quality". Now what?

Her hand was lightly resting on the rough table and suddenly the man behind her exclaimed in Italian, "Your hand, signorina! The spider!"

Toni turned quietly without moving her hand. "I beg your pardon?" she said in a smiling perplexity and apology.

"It is nothing. I thought I saw one of our very big spiders so close to your hand," said the newcomer in English.

Toni snatched her hand from the table with alacrity. "Oh no! I hate the creatures!" she exclaimed in horror.

"I am satisfied, Stefano. You may give her the bottles."

The proprietor of the wine shop disappeared into the gloom beyond the wine racks and Toni had a moment for quick observation. She turned to the man behind her and said, "You speak English well."

"Thank you, signorina," he smiled.

He was a little man of contrasts. He had a shiny bald head and a neat little pointed beard. His clothes were rough and his boots sturdy and muddy and yet about him was a faint dandified whiff of perfume.

When the wine seller returned with the three bottles of wine she was surprised to see they were fiaschis of Chianti in their attractive little wicker baskets. She had expected something of a local nature for she knew there was a coarse red wine produced in these high valleys of the north. But, of course, Chianti would be an obvious choice for a tourist to take back to England.

She thanked the wine seller, gave the two men a smile and returned with the three bottles to the car.

When she paid the affable driver at her hotel in Porto Maurizio she said, "I would like you again this evening, I am going to take another ride into the mountains. Could you be available?"

"Of course, signorina," and with a sort of sly insight, added smilingly, "And I am always discreet."

"Of that, I am glad," said Toni amused at his shrewd con-

jecture that she probably was not all she seemed.

In her hotel room she took a hypodermic syringe she had been provided with by the "saints" and carefully pushed it through the cork of one of the chianti bottles and extracted a small quantity of the liquid in the bottle. Then she packaged the syringe, addressed the package and left it to be called for at the hotel reception desk.

Two hours later she received a phone call. "I am happy to inform you, signorina, that the goods you ordered may be paid for in sterling," the caller politely informed her.

Toni felt that irrepressible flaring of excitement which the prospects of adventure always kindled within her. The Chianti bottles contained LSD!

Well, a little research should tell me more about this LSD, she surmised. This she accomplished quite simply by making a purchase at the nearest *farmacia*.

One little doubt nagged in her mind. There are laboratories and laboratories. How could she distinguish one manufacturing LSD from any other? She was certain she would find a laboratory, but would it be the right one? This was a bridge to cross later however, and if she had made a mistake—then she had made a mistake.

She made other purchases in Porto Maurizio—a dark pair of slacks and a black polo necked pullover, a pair of black rubber soled shoes and a long thin nylon rope.

The young Italian driver regarded Toni's sombre outfit with surprise. Evidently he was having to revise his previous conjectures, but being "discreet" he quickly dissembled his feelings and assumed a comically inscrutable expression. When Toni told him she wished to be taken to the Colle di Nava his eyes widened, but he merely said, "Si signorina," with a half-stifled gulp of astonishment. The pretty signorina inglese was generous and, by her cool aplomb, of the nobility, without a doubt. Who was he to question some madcap impulse on her part?

Though it was impossible to see anything beyond the bright area of the headlights he tried to be helpful to his charmingly

enigmatical passenger by describing the scenery they couldn't see. It would also show her that he was being "discreet".

"This is the Valle dell Imperio—very beautiful—and there are many charming villages on the hill tops."

A little later he murmured, "The ruined castle on the hill top above us belonged to the Counts of Ventimiglia. The olive groves and chestnut woods on the hill slopes are very lovely, signorina."

Beyond Pieve di Teco he said, "Monte Saccarello, signorina," and waved a hand vaguely towards a black mass against the starlit sky.

"Then we are on the Colle di Nava?"

"Si signorina. We are on the Colle di Nava."

"Good. There is a factory in the pass?"

"The factory so-called, is a restored torre Saraceni—a tower built long ago, you understand, signorina, to repel the Saracen invasions. It is a very small factory . . ."

"Thank you. Please drop me here and go on to Case di Nava and wait for me there."

"You will walk through the pass, signorina?" he asked incredulously. "At night?"

"Of course. It is an English custom to walk in the dark sometimes. You have heard perhaps that we are an eccentric race?"

"I have heard so, signorina," he said seriously.

She watched the red tail lights of the car as it went on its way down the road to Case di Nava and feeling very lonely and vulnerable on the dark road, set off to find the road or causeway, which she knew must lead off the main road to the torre Saraceni, the lighted windows of which she could see on the hillside a little ahead of her.

The tower was hexagonal in shape and had a brick annexe of sorts built on to it. There were recent brick restorations on the tower itself.

She crept up to the annexe and peered cautiously through one of the lighted windows. She felt a tremor of excitement when she saw within all the appurtenances of a laboratory of sorts, but the scale of the apparatus and the hundreds of identical

little bottles neatly arranged on shelves rather discounted the idea that anything more was produced here than some prosaic and useful household commodity. Besides, she knew this was so.

If LSD were being manufactured here it would be in the torre Saraceni itself.

Getting into the building was one thing, getting out another, and both difficult, but one thing at a time. A little resourcefulness and a little audacity would accomplish the first—and there was always luck.

She felt around until she found a sizeable stone and hiding behind one of the corners of the hexagonal tower, she let out a long and mournful banshee wailing.

Immediately there was an excited murmur of voices within the tower. Two voices, she thought. She gave another long vibrating wail and heard feet clattering down stone stairs. The door of the annexe flew open, and a powerful beam of light shone across the low scrub and rock on the hillside. Then she hurled the stone down the causeway and heard it bouncing and clattering on the steep slope.

Two dark figures, with wavering beams of light ahead of them, started hastily from the doorway. She saw the barrels of a stubby shot gun in the light from the doorway.

Silently and swiftly—a momentary shadow amongst darker shadows—she slipped through the open door and sped across the factory towards the staircase leading up to the tower.

How long had she? Five minutes? She ran lightly up ancient stone stairs, spiralling interminably—then a door leading off and a crack of light. A moment to listen, another to peer through the crack, then quick decision. She pushed open the door and found another laboratory, smaller and with more delicately assembled apparatus, but she had not the knowledge to know what was produced in the retorts and flasks she saw on the bench against the stone wall.

To add to her doubts there was a plain kitchen table in the centre of the room with food and wine on it—portions of chicken, a dish of cheeses, bread, glasses and a freshly opened



bottle of Chianti. It was obvious the meal had not been started.

She looked at the chemical apparatus in perplexity. She sniffed enthusiastically at a Winchester half-full of a colourless liquid. This could merely be some adjunct to the process going on below, which she knew was perfectly legal. How did one detect LSD or ergotoxine? Nobody had thought to brief her!

She considered the bottle of Chianti on the table—the clean glasses—Oh lord, yes! She could find out by a simple little experiment.

Like lightning she grabbed the bottle of wine and tilted it over the sink on the bench. The wine gurgled away with exasperating slowness and the tap hissed and splashed with malicious noisiness as she washed the wine away. She found a funnel and filled the now empty Chianti bottle with the liquid from the Winchester. Finally she brought the latter back to its previous level with water from the tap.

Then a quick glance round to memorise every detail of the laboratory—

Distantly she could hear voices growing louder and by their tones proclaiming a vociferous indignation. There was no escape through the annexe. The only alternative was the roof. Only the twists of spiral staircase saved her from discovery for the light from their torches danced behind her as she flew up the staircase.

She heard with satisfaction the two men discussing the banshee wailing and the clatter on the causeway as the antics of a stray donkey!

There was a thud as the laboratory door closed and the voices died to a subdued murmur. Then she unwound the slim rope from her waist and looping it around one of the crenellations of the tower dropped the two ends to the ground. Gripping both ends of the rope she slid down the wall to the ground. It was a simple matter to retrieve the rope and leave no evidence of her visit to the tower.

"You enjoyed your walk in the dark, signorina?" enquired her Italian driver as she walked up to the car in the square at Case di Nava.

"Very much," said Toni. "And now we will return to Porto Maurizio and if we can I should like to buy a fiaschi of Chianti somewhere."

"That is not impossible," said the smiling young driver, who had long since given up wondering about the eccentricities of the signorina inglese. There would be no difficulty in getting her a fiaschi of Chianti in the early hours of the morning although the request was unusual.

"As for our return—go like the wind, please. I would like to be in my hotel within the hour."

She was—and ten minutes later her phone bell rang.

"Signorina," said an agitated voice. "You dropped your passport in the wine shop this afternoon. It was discovered but a few moments ago."

"Good heavens!" Toni exclaimed with appropriate horrified amazement. "How careless of me. Can you get it to me quickly please? We leave for England in a few hours' time."

"In less than an hour, signorina."

It was the scented, bald-headed man who came up to her room threequarters of an hour later. His face was a picture of consternation and anxiety.

"You must have made a mistake," said Toni, "My passport was in my handbag."

"Of course, signorina! It was a subterfuge. I could not say over the phone what I had to say."

"Then what is wrong?"

"The fiachis of Chianti, signorina. May I see them?"

"Of course," said Toni.

Toni took three bottles of Chianti from her luggage and with feigned mystification placed them on the bed for his examination.

"As I thought, signorina! One is a mistake. This! He held up the fiaschi of Chianti Toni had bought in the small hours of the morning at a wine seller in Porto Maurizio, who seemed to have been some near relation of the young Italian driver.

"Then what happens now?" said Toni.

"By error—nobody knows how you have been given the wrong bottle. This one. If you put the other two in your luggage and leave this one to be carried by itself, at some point of your journey to the airport a substitution will be made."

"I will do that," said Toni as the other withdrew, obviously greatly relieved that he had rectified what he thought a mistake.

Tony saw the substitution in the hotel lounge as the party assembled for the coach to take them to the airport at Nice. It was cleverly and simply done and she doubted if she would have noticed had she not been expecting it.

And so the adventure was over. The rest lay in the hands of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

There were four bottles of LSD to dispose of—three to a bearded young man, dressed in all of Carnaby Street's glory, in a three wheeler car gaily painted with pink and blue flowers, which Toni had been informed by phone would be in the Kings Road at such and such a day. The young man called her "ducks" and gave her twenty rather grimy five-pound notes.

The fourth bottle Bill Rogerson collected from her riverside cottage one evening.

"Well Toni," said Bill. "I do compliment you on your cleverness."

"Luck, Bill. Fortunately they had not poured the wine and, of course, they jumped to the obvious conclusion when LSD was poured instead of Chianti after their return from searching for a mythical donkey. The visit next morning proved beyond doubt the watch tower was the LSD laboratory."

"But how on earth did you discover the lab in the first place?"

"By scent!" Toni laughed. "The bald-headed man smelt strongly of lavender. It was not hair cream for he was bald: it was not shave lotion for he was bearded; it wasn't effeminacy for his clothes were rough workman's clothes; so he was in contact with lavender in some other way—a lavender water manufactory. So I deduced the LSD was being made in a lavender water manufactory."

"Clever logic!" grinned Bill. "Devious female logic!"

"No comment, Bill!" laughed Toni. "So I went to the nearest *farmacia* and asked for a bottle of locally made *acqua di lavanda*. The label on the bottle stated the perfume was made in the Colle di Nava. In the Colle di Nava they grow lavender."

"And so," said Bill, "a whiff of lavender; some quaint logic and a rather brazen interference with a man's tippie and the U.N. Commission smokes out another LSD laboratory!"

The following weekend in Paris she asked Timothy, "If a bald-headed, bearded man in rough working clothes smelled of lavender Timothy, what would you deduce?"

"Obvious!" laughed Timothy. "He had been using his wife's lavender scented soap."


"Oh lor!" sighed Toni.



ELIMINATING BOUT

LOUIS ALLEGRI

*O'Neil knocked him cold with the butt
of his revolver ...*

NEIL CHEWED his nails as he sat in one of the cheaper rows of seats at the back of the stadium waiting for the lights to dim and the main bout of the evening to start. His pale, nervous eyes stared from behind dark glasses at the blue coated peanut vendor standing near the ringside seats.

Willie Moran versus Levinsky. He would have liked to have watched the big fight after sitting through most of the preliminaries, particularly as he had backed Moran, but there were more important things to do like killing Big Jim Gracchi, whose gingery, balding head he could see near the peanut man, surrounded by a dozen or so hoodlums and bejewelled females.

He always felt very nervous before a job, but this only showed in his nailbiting. This contract was his biggest ever. There were some variables he couldn't control, but he felt reasonably confident Gracchi would be snuffed out like a light before the second round of the Middleweight elimination bout had got properly under way.

The best moment, he decided, would be just before the round started, when no matter how dull the opening one might have been, there would be just enough excitement to distract Gracchi and his mob a little. That was all he wanted. Not enough to spoil the big man's digestion. He would be arguing the odds with the bookmakers as they nervously chewed their cigars and made computer-sharp calculations.

"Ring me as soon as it's done," Jenson had looked as if he didn't really expect to see the tall, pale faced O'Neil anymore. But if anyone could do it that was O'Neil, and Jenson was prepared for an almighty gangland takeover that would be

completed by the time the chaos had subsided around Gracchi's cadaver.

After the ring rituals had been concluded, the lights dimmed as the two boxers shuffled towards each other, and O'Neil adjusted his dark glasses, pulled down the brim of his hat, and slipped down the aisle in the semi-darkness to tap his particular vendor on the shoulder.

"Boss wants you."

"Mr. Callaghan?"

"Yep. Dressing room number three." He pointed to the exit at the top of the steps.

"Dressing room? What for?"

"Better ask him. . . . Someone's been stealing from the catering section, I think. There's a pile of stuff lying there."

He followed the man's shadowy figure through Exit 'B' and down some steps, then, as the man hesitated outside the room a short distance along the passage that led to a street exit, O'Neil knocked him cold with the butt of his revolver and shoved him into the room as he heard a mighty roar from the crowded arena.

The first round had just ended when he stood calmly looking down just inside Exit 'B', dressed in the unconscious vendor's official blue coat, and feeling the straps of the tray cutting into the back of his shoulders.

That's what made him one of the best, he thought arrogantly. He could always rely on that sudden coldness that would envelop him when it was time for action. When the preliminaries were over as it were, and it was time for the main bout with the victim in his sights. He might be nervous before and after. But now! Now everything. Everyone looked smaller. He liked that.

He adjusted the contents of his tray which now held some bars of chocolate, cigarettes and a few bags of peanuts. Gracchi often ate peanuts during a fight. O'Neil had made it his business to know that. He stepped into the smoky turmoil.

Ignoring the hails of customers, he walked steadily down towards his victim whose heavy shoulders extended over the

seats on either side of him.

"Peanuts. Peanuts, sir . . . ?"

A couple of toughs at the end of Gracchi's row glared, looking incongruous in dinner jackets.

"Peanuts?"

"Beat it." One of them jerked his head.

"Chocolates. Peanuts?"

"I said beat it . . . !"

Gracchi, a few seats along, turned his head and then nodded, hardly noticing O'Neil, before continuing an argument with the man next to him. It seemed Levinsky had been caught badly with a right cross through over-confidence and the betting boys were badly confused.

The pasty faced hoodlum at the end of the row, with a face full of scar tissue, took the bag offered to him, but then, no doubt thinking he was being clever and doing the job for which he was paid, threw it back and grabbed another which was passed towards Gracchi as the lights went down for the second round.

O'Neil controlled his breathing as he walked towards Exit 'B', and then suddenly stepped back as alert as a wild animal.

"What the hell you here for?" The man stepped in front of him, threw some money into the tray, grabbed a pack of cigarettes, and returned, muttering to his seat.

He ignored some other waving customers and felt his heart pumping fiercely as he reached the deserted passage and entered dressing room number three; the old dressing rooms leading off the passage weren't used any more since another part of the stadium had been modernised.

The vendor was still lying motionless in a heap on the stone floor. He nudged him with his foot and then discarded the blue coat and tray.

Before leaving, O'Neil stuffed the remaining bags of peanuts into his pocket. Gracchi, he knew, would be dead within two minutes of taking his first mouthful, and one killing was what he was paid for; it had been simple enough to doctor the bags of peanuts, he had displayed, with cyanide. Of course, if

Gracchi offered his around, well, that would be too bad.

O'Neil poked his head outside the room. The passage was still deserted, not unexpectedly, and he grinned ruefully as he made his way towards the street exit and thought it would be a sad waste if the glittering, starry blonde on Gracchi's right liked peanuts.

There was a telephone at the end of the passage, but he decided things would be happening any moment now and hastened into the darkness at the back of the stadium.

The nearest booth was only just over a minute's walk away, and, after dialling Jenson, he chewed nervously at his nails as he waited.

"Yeah?"

"It's done, Mr. Jenson."

"You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I . . ."

"What's the matter? You all right?"

"I don't know, Mr. Jenson? Can't understand what—? Oh, God. No . . ."

"O'Neil . . . ?"

"Cyanide . . . must have got . . . under my nails . . ."



Shall man into the mystery of breath
From his quick beating pulse a pathway spy?
Or learn the secret of the shrouded death,
By lifting up the lid of a white eye?

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE LAST PLATEAU

Oliver Taylor

*She looked so innocent and frightened as her eyes
darted from the corpse to . . .*

RICHARD MURRAY knew a savage joy as he pressed the towel over his sleeping wife's face. As the train swayed through the wintry greyness of the Northern California night, he pressed down harder.

No more bullying from her because it was "all meant for his good." She had a glitter hard beauty relieved only by cosmetics. But those sculpted features were now softening for he could feel her jerk away, and knew she was experiencing terror. He exulted. This was not a murder; it was a well-planned execution, with Shirley as his assistant somewhere on the train.

He was almost glad she had come to a little, despite the chloroform he had carefully splashed on the towel. So that was the end of Anna; how he longed for Shirley to join him . . .

They crossed California and streaked through the passes of Western Nevada. The body of his wife was now covered by a blanket. He could almost have forgotten her, except for the carefully devised plan he had made with Shirley.

The transcontinental express slowed down as it made the gradual descent from the High Sierras to the Great Basin. They had planned for snow and, right on schedule, just as the weathermen had predicted, the blizzard struck in Central Nevada. He knew he had to be patient until they reached Utah, but he was safe and expected only Shirley to disturb him soon. He wished she would hurry and come quickly. His mind began to become slightly disturbed by the vision of the dead Anna rising up from the seat opposite to nag him as she had done while she was alive.

He reminded himself that the arrangement with Shirley, his assistant at his pharmacy shop, was for her to wait until 12.30 before she came to his compartment. It would be late enough then for the corridors to be deserted and they could set about

the grim task of getting rid of Anna.

In his imagination, he transformed his wife's hard face to the softer features of his mistress who would soon take her place at his side. Openly. It would be nice to show her off, although they would have to be discreet and wait awhile. Shirley had dusky, violet eyes. He thought of those eyes, so much more alluring than the brittle blue ones with which Anna used to glare at him as she nagged, nagged, nagged . . .

He began to perspire. He had something to do, he thought. He looked across at the dead body and realised he had to undress it. He could not remember clearly who had suggested the whole idea. He knew he had often thought of removing Anna . . . was it through divorce? but not without revealing Shirley, for Anna had never been interested in other men; and that would have ruined his reputation in the narrow-minded small town where he had his pharmacy. But . . . was murder preferable to the stigma of divorce?

He thought of Shirley's innocent eyes, her amiable sweet features, and realised that the idea must have come from him. He remembered that Shirley had made some timid suggestions once the idea had been broached; he remembered a vague unease that she had not been shocked; but then, he told himself earnestly, she loved him—she had made that obvious. But it was she who had suggested that she should change into Anna's smartly tailored blue coat suit so that, having disposed of the body, they could both leave the train at Salt Lake City and witnesses could swear he had left with his wife. She and Anna were of a size and almost the same ash blonde colouring.

Because he could no longer endure the doubts of his swirling thoughts he got up abruptly and looked down the corridor. It was still empty. It was likely to be. He didn't think there was anyone in this coach; for which reason he had deliberately chosen it. Shirley was in the next one; she would get through by unlocking the doors between. They would have to do the same when they got rid of the body.

He closed the door and turned back to his dead wife. It was a distasteful task, to have to undress her, but he had to do it. To

think that once, in the early days of their marriage, this would have been a task which would have been most pleasurable to him!

He smiled caustically as he set to work. It took a long time, longer than he imagined. He had to keep his mind on the job, trying desperately to ignore the open staring and accusing eyes. He was relieved when suit and underclothing were off at last—he had thought of the underclothing because a nude body would be more difficult to trace, or at least its identity would take longer.

He became aware of the sibilant sucking and wheezing of the train's air brakes and thought for a moment they were going to stop. His heart fluttered, but the train gathered speed again.

He looked at his watch and was astonished to see that it was now 1.28 a.m. Where on earth was Shirley? Had she backed out? For a moment he experienced real panic. Then he thought of the way she had told him she loved him and would stand by him no matter if he was a murderer—murderer. God—and he sighed. He wiped his face with his handkerchief.

Gritting his teeth, he put a blanket on his wife's body and waited.

Suddenly he was aware of a rustling sound. He panicked again as the knob of the door turned. He was ashen as Shirley entered. She closed the door quickly and leaned against it, gasping for breath.

He recovered at once. This was the time to be masterful, he thought. After all, since he had been strong enough to commit a murder, his reluctant accomplice ought to be made to feel his superiority.

He got up and took her in his arms.

"Frightened?" he asked tenderly, and was about to kiss her when she drew away from him, flushing.

"Of course not! Just had to catch my breath. I had to run—all the way. And I just missed the porter by seconds." Then she smiled suddenly and he felt himself melting, captivated by her deep, husky voice. "He's gone, anyway—to the rear of the train, I think. He won't disturb us."

He managed to kiss her, although a little nagging thought came to him that she was more interested in the dead body.

"You've . . . you've done it?" she asked.

"At the moment I said I would," he told her, and now he did feel himself master of the situation. "About two hours ago."

She cautiously approached the body and drew the blanket aside. Shuddering, she covered Anna up. He was glad to see her a little frightened as she seemed almost to fling herself into his arms. They whispered softly to each other, as if in consolation for some obscure thought, perhaps a mutual feeling of guilt.

The train lurched violently and Shirley recovered herself at the same time. Wheels whined and brakes wheezed as it screeched to a stop. Her eyes widened as she stared at him.

"Wh-what's happened?" He had never seen her so nervous and unsure of herself; what a refreshing change from Anna, always so poised, never thrown by anything. He went to the window and raised the shade slightly. Outside the white polka-dot world lay in sullen darkness.

"Only a refuelling stop," he smiled, turning back to her.

She had recovered and was sitting; her eyes sparkled with streaks of violet.

"I've got an idea, Richard," she said abruptly. "Let's move the body to my compartment while the train's stopped."

He flushed with sudden annoyance.

"What an absurd idea! The sort of thing Anna might have suggested . . .

". . . if I'd been where she is now?" Shirley said, and her smile became a laugh. "I thought it would be a good idea. Nobody would discover her until the train got as far as Denver—or even Chicago. We'd long be gone by then."

"Can't you see, darling. Then every passenger on board would be suspected, even those who had got off. Which means you and me. Let's keep to our original plan. It's been snowing hard and if we throw the body out of the train where we said we would it'll hardly be discovered until the spring thaw, at least three months from now. We'll both be thousands of miles away

and the corpse might not be recognisable."

"What if someone sees us dumping the body?" she asked. "Oh dear, I'm getting nervous. Why did we have to do this? Why couldn't we have gone on the way we did?"

"But you wanted . . ."

"I wanted nothing," she said. "She wasn't doing me any harm."

"You wanted to be my wife, didn't you? So it was logical to get rid of her. Wasn't it?" he frowned. Dimly he recalled a conversation with Shirley in the intimacy of her bedroom. Somehow the thought of murdering Anna had arisen that night. But he could not remember how this had come about. One moment they seemed to have been making love, the next, talking murder.

He stared across at her. She was frowning petulantly and had made no answer. Suddenly her eyes softened. She was beautiful and desirable but he could not say he really understood her. Then, what man ever understood the inconsistency of woman?

"I shouldn't have let you talk me into this," she muttered. "She did no harm to anyone."

"She nagged me—nagged me constantly!" he heard himself cry out. He calmed and came to sit at her side. He held her in his arms. "Oh darling, you're all jittery."

"Of course I am. Who wouldn't be in the circumstances?" She kissed him, her arms tight and warm round his neck. "Let's be calm, shall we? After all, I've got to be Anna now, haven't I?"

He stared at her, puzzled, and said nothing. She looked so innocent and frightened as her eyes darted from the corpse to him and then to the window.

She said no more. They had not yet reached the plateau where they intended to rid themselves of the corpse. He noticed that she had closed her eyes. Relaxed now, he looked at her with his old tenderness; a thousand memories of their halcyon days and clandestine nights made ever more exciting by plans for their future. She was so ingenuous and lovely, it had been worth killing Anna for her; and he was so tired and nervous that he

had become too edgy from imagining all sorts of futile things. She was now breathing steadily, which was more than could be said for Anna. He suddenly chuckled as he glanced at the body with its blanket.

At that very moment there was a movement from beneath the blanket and for a second he thought Anna was still alive. He shuddered uncontrollably before he realised that the movement had been caused by the swaying rush of the train as it hurtled through the night.

Time passed. Outside he could see the snowflakes thickening, coming down with increasing speed. He dozed, his mind awlirl with fanciful portraits of Anna and Shirley, dancing and jousting until they fell, wrapped together in a cloak of snow.

He forced himself awake. It was nearly five o'clock, he saw by his watch. He aroused Shirley who came to, quickly. It was astonishing how self-possessed she seemed, and he wondered momentarily if she had forgotten about the body. But no. He saw her quick glance across to the corpse.

"We're almost there," he said. "And in four hours we'll be in Salt Lake City."

"I'll be glad when it's over, darling."

Inching the shade aside, he peered out of the window. The snow had stopped almost as abruptly as it had begun to fall. The train, passing through a narrow gorge, was silhouetted like a long black snake on the snow-covered walls. He turned back to take a map from his briefcase, squinting at it in the gloom of the compartment. He noted only one large uninhabited plain between here and Salt Lake City. This canyon must be either its entrance or its exit.

He glowed as, looking out again, he saw the track burst suddenly out on to a level, treeless plateau. This must be it . . . nothing but miles of flat whiteness within a wall of high mountains. This was just the spot!

"This is it, Shirley!"

She had been staring at the body again. Now she looked up, startled. He thought he saw a smoulder of resentment in her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"This is where we dump her," he said impatiently. "Come on!" He hovered over the corpse, waiting.

Reluctantly she stood up and joined him. Her eyes strayed to the window.

"It's snowing again," she said.

"Come on! Time's getting on."

"Would you have killed me if you loved someone else?" she asked thoughtfully, staring down at Anna's face, now exposed to her gaze.

"What a thing to ask. Of course not. I wouldn't love anyone else."

"You must have said that to her often enough," she murmured.

"Didn't you want me to—to do this?"

"I—I don't know. I think I did. But . . . now it's done . . ."

"Now it's done you've got to help me get rid of the evidence," he fumed.

Suddenly she smiled and gripped Anna's shoulder almost carelessly.

"Yes, you're right," she said. "Regrets are stupid—especially at moments like this. Besides, I wanted it, didn't I?"

He hated touching the dead woman's naked body; evidently so did she, for she said:

"Did you have to take off her undies too? She looks disgusting!"

"I'm sorry, but . . . I thought it would be harder to identify her this way."

"I'll wear her suit, but I'm not wearing her undies too." She looked angry. For a moment he had a vague sensation of having seen Shirley as someone else, somewhere in the recent past.

It was not easy carrying Anna to her last resting place. They had to stop because her body was heavy, and they had to stop, fearing and trembling, to make quite sure the porter wasn't around. He was probably catching up on his sleep, but one never knew.

They came to the end of the car at last. The exit door was

bolted from the inside by means of a simple sliding bolt. While he held the body Shirley slide the bolt and pushed the door open. There was a flurry of wind and snow.

But Anna refused to budge. He had not accounted for a quick onset of rigor mortis because of the extreme cold.

"Oh, you're heavy," Shirley said suddenly to the corpse. The words startled him; it sounded as if she expected a reply.

She grasped the body and nodded towards the steps.

"Move down a bit. If we don't hurry, we'll be out of the plateau before we've got rid of her."

His hands caught the corpse's stiffening legs. He leaned forward and the wind and snow buffeted him cruelly, blurring his vision as he looked down the length of the train. Most of the cars were still in darkness.

"We've passed the plateau, damn it!" she cried.

His head jerked back into the coach, and he looked out again, squinting against the wind. Indeed, while he had been preoccupied in holding on to his position, the train had passed through a short narrow canyon. They were now moving across a wide plain glistening like millions of white diamonds. It must be covered with thick snow, which suited his purpose better. But he was sure he had not seen another plain indicated on his map.

"I can't see any place for miles," she called. "Let's get rid of her."

She pushed hard, suddenly releasing her end of the burden. He almost went with the body and only let go at the last moment. He clung, sweating, to his foothold. Then he looked up at her and for a second wondered if she deliberately had tried to get rid of him too.

Which was silly, he told himself as she gently helped him back into the car; what was there in it for her? She had no money of her own; no position worth while; in fact, her whole life, her future, was wrapped up in him. After a decent interval they were going to be married. They had decided on that months ago.

After the blast of the Rockies wind, there was almost a

friendly warmth back in their compartment. He watched Shirley change into his dead wife's suit, and apply the make-up. It was surprising the transformation it made in her.

She spun round gaily.

"How do I look?" she asked, laughing.

Women! he thought; you wouldn't think she'd just helped rid him of the corpse which, when alive, had worn those clothes.

"Charming," he said hoarsely.

She sat down.

"Now let's catch up on our sleep," she murmured.

He was so exhausted that he too fell asleep, first taking care to set his travelling alarm clock. At eight o'clock it went off and he turned to wake her. For one ghastly second he imagined himself back to the evening before, when Anna had sat opposite him. With her eyes closed, her face set in grim lines, caught unawares as it were, and with the dead woman's clothes, Shirley looked for all the world like Anna.

He awoke her abruptly and she sat up with a quick smile. The illusion vanished. "We're racing along the Great Salt Lake Desert," he told her, after a quick glance outside.

"Now remember: we leave the train at Salt Lake City, board the New York plane, and there we'll find the money waiting from the sale of the pharmacy."

"Then off to Europe we go," she murmured. "Ah, it's like a dream come true!"

He sat with her and lost himself in her for a moment.

"You're so clever," he heard her say. "Such a perfect plan."

"But *you* had something to do with it too," he said, almost unwillingly. "Without you . . ."

She brought his head down to her shoulders, as if deliberately closing his lips.

"We're arriving," she said, and he lifted himself up.

He looked out of the window to a jumble of streets and buildings. Releasing air from its brakes, the train began to slow.

"We're there," he announced triumphantly. "Get ready!" He turned back again to the window and the light went out of his eyes. She joined him and watched grimly as the wheels

screached to a stop at the long station's platform. Strung out along the line were uniformed policemen; with them were obvious detectives.

They listened to the message over the public address system.

"We must ask all those arriving on the San Francisco express to wait patiently while the police carry out an investigation. The body of a nude woman has been found in the Salt Flats. There is reason to believe she was thrown from this train."

"You fool!" she screamed, as she turned viciously on him. "You damned fool! That was Salt Flats we came across. Salt, you fool."

The awful significance struck him like ice water. What he had taken for snow had been salt crystals which could only melt and absorb the snow almost as quickly as it fell. The body had never been covered.

He tried desperately to find excuses, as helpless as he had always been with Anna . . . no, not Anna. Shirley. What was the matter with him? This was Shirley!

But as he looked at her he saw this was not the Shirley he had known. She had planned the whole thing carefully, as meticulously as Anne would have done in the circumstances. He was as much her victim as Anna had been; and . . .

"Shirley!" he stammered.

"You can't do a single thing right, can you? You always were a little man, you always will be!" The eyes flared, the tongue lashed, the face swirled and grew enormous.

This was Anna, he thought, sinking inside; no matter what she called herself, this was Anna—all over again.

He wanted to scream out in a frenzy of hate and frustration.



BRISCOTT'S LOT

JOHN TOMES

*He pulled at the metal ring, simultaneously tensing
to meet the jerk that would . . .*

PROBABLY none of the other passengers noticed the two men sitting in the paired back seats.

The first to embark maybe threw a quick, curious glance, in the way people do when they know they are heading the straggle and are momentarily taken aback to find someone already there. V.I.P.'s of some kind, they would have concluded, or more likely something to do with the airline. But to the rest, this was merely a couple who had forced ahead and got themselves good places.

Nor did the fact that the seats immediately in front and to the side bore Crew Only notices cause other than passing comment.

All of which was as it should have been.

No airline cares to advertise that two of its passengers are handcuffed to one another. Even less that one of the two is known to have led what was without dispute the most spectacular, profitable and pitiless criminal coup of the age. Profitable, because the thieves got away with over £2 million. Spectacular, because probably for the first time a gang used uniforms, helicopters and parachutes. Pitiless because two guards were gunned down without being given a chance.

Now the almost legendary Arthur Briscott, missing for nine months until picked up in Naples a few days earlier, sat captive and outwardly subdued in the Economy compartment of a London bound aircraft. A slim, morosely dark and wary looking man in his thirties, handcuffed to a contrastingly stocky and fair but just as wary Chief Superintendent Flint.

With unspoken agreement, neither said anything until well after take-off.

Briscott glowered moodily down as the aircraft banked low across the lovely sweep of bay, his mouth setting hard and bitter as he compared this sparkling, sunlit freedom with the chill drabness that was to come.

Yet? Yet need things really be as cut and dried and greyly final as they seemed?

The line of his mouth eased cautiously, as his mind started another switchback round of the same calculating circle.

After all, sitting here like this was no more than a situation already foreseen, one of a number against which certain plans had been made. Bold, outrageous plans. Anything less would have been unthinkable, so he had cast them himself. Oh, yes, the plans were fine. But had his friends (for want of a better term) the skill or the will? There was the rub. Yet they had the strongest of all possible motives. Of that, also, he had made particularly sure.

But there was that other lot too. And with a motive every bit as compulsive.

The mouth hardened into a new line, as Briscott's guts winced at this reminding clutch. It could be the one lot, or the other. Or nothing. Or even some combination. Each of the four choices was equally likely. Or unlikely. He tried without success to look about him, to find some hint, however slender. But crane and stretch as he might, he saw only the backs of anonymous, uncaring heads.

For Flint also there was a dream. Less urgent and less complex than his companion's, but real enough for all that. Quite simply, he saw this quarry he had so long hunted, disappear convicted below the dock, while he himself took the next train to Sussex and retirement.

It was Briscott who broke the long, introspective silence.

"Would you believe me," he essayed, "if I said how deeply sorry I am that those two men were killed?"

Flint grunted something, and turned indifferently towards his forced companion.

"You've been cautioned," was the only answer he gave.

"I know, I know," came back the almost petulant reaction.

"But I shall plead guilty, so what the hell? I haven't got a bloody chance, have I?"

"As a purely personal opinion, I should say not."

"How did you get on to me? I don't mean finding me in Naples, that was my blunder, but how did you ever connect me with the job in the first place? Will you tell me that?"

"Your blunder again."

"How so?"

Flint held the other's questioning gaze. It was a pity that his reply was going to have to carry an undertone of credit.

"Elimination, that's all. There wasn't anybody else would have planned in terms of an airborne operation."

"Was that really all?"

"To start with, yes. Then things started to fall into place."

"Such as?"

"You'll learn in good time."

Briscott's jaw tightened as he accepted the rebuff. "Too clever, eh? So I was too bloody clever?"

"You could put it that way."

What Flint had told him was no more than what Briscott had privately suspected, but this blunt confirmation rubbed the sore. Sullenly he reverted to his earlier question.

"But those two guards. You do believe me, don't you?"

"Believe what? That you're sorry? Of course you're sorry, Briscott. You must be sorry about a whole lot of things."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. I'm trying to say I'm genuinely sorry. It was all a silly mistake."

"A slip-up in Arthur Briscott's immaculate organization! Just a bit of bad luck, you'll be pleading next!" Flint's voice and eyes spat and flashed the contemptuous, angry irony. "Two fine men doing no more than their job, and just because they get in the way of your plans, bang bang and they're dead. Two families left without fathers. Stop talking, Briscott, you're making me sick."

He turned pointedly away, and Briscott reddened. Like many of his breed he was quick to resent any doubt on his word, especially when he had come close to convincing himself he was

speaking the truth. Flint's judgement was too near the sensitive knuckle for comfort. He bit and moved his lips indecisively before blurting: "All the same, those guns were only to go with the uniform. I'd said they weren't to be used."

The other sat rigid, studiously indifferent. He had said his piece, given way to his moment of emotion. He did not in the least care what orders Briscott had given. All that mattered was that two innocent people had died, and that the man responsible was now shackled to his left wrist.

The loaded pause was interrupted by the stewardess, breezy and artificially cheerful as she leaned across to let down the lap table, first in front of Briscott and then for Flint. For what seemed a long second her eyes caught Briscott's. Disturbed, hunted eyes, he thought, and the wild hope momentarily flared that there could have been a message somewhere in their uncertain depths.

Then she was addressing Flint.

"Supper, sir?" she queried. Adding awkwardly, and still pointedly speaking to Flint, "for both gentlemen?"

Briscott realized then that all the crew would of course have been briefed who he was. Almost certainly they would also have been warned that he could be dangerous. Amused, he watched the girl's eyes flicking compulsively towards the hump of the linked wrists. There was even a stab of sexual pleasure in the awareness that she was torn three ways between revulsion, fear and admiration.

Forehead raised, Flint looked across and Briscott nodded. Why not? He needed both the food and the girl's quivering nearness as she served it. Probably the last reasonable meal he would enjoy for years: certainly the last opportunity to touch a girl, however fleetingly and even if it was only through her uniform.

"And something to drink, sir?"

Surprisingly, this time she addressed him direct. The eyes were wide and round, unmistakably for him alone, and once again a shadow suggested a message struggling for release.

And once again Arthur Briscott asked himself "Why not?"

But "Yes, Whisky, please" was what he grinned back, openly matching her attention.

Flint ordered beer.

They straightened in their seats, repositioning respectively left and right arms, both men seeking refuge in the window. It offered only a sunseting mist of blue and gold in which sea and sky merged. Then as the sun dropped, its last rays touched a hint of mountain thrusting above the haze. Corsica, they guessed. The Captain had announced they should be able to see it.

"When we get to London," Flint suddenly volunteered almost as though prodded by this glimpse of a real world below, "we'll be the first off, and there'll be a van backed up to the foot of the steps. There'll also be a horde of photographers. Do you want me to throw that over your face?" He jerked his head towards the light raincoat that covered their wrists.

"Keep your bloody coat!" Briscott snarled, nettled both by his captor's hostile reserve and at this bleak reminder. "I'll flash a smile and give the telly viewers a thrill."

"As you wish."

"You seem damned convinced you're going to get me under lock and key!" Anger mingled with a touch of uncertain mockery.

"You're there already."

"What? This?" the prisoner scoffed, lifting his wrist and dragging his neighbour's with the movement. "Don't get over confident, friend Flint. You haven't slammed the cell door yet."

The other's expression set defensively. He was well used to this brittle whistling in the dark of men who were trapped. Yet he sensed something elusively different here, and he hoped there was no betraying trace of that prickling wariness, which despite all commonsense was tapping at some back window of his brain.

"I'm not good at riddles," he pleaded.

Briscott hooded his eyes. He knew he had got under Flint's skin, and the theatrical touch struck him as pleasingly appro-

priate.

"Let's just say there are two lots interested in Arthur Briscott. Apart from your lot, that is. One lot want me to talk. . . ."

"Tell them where the money is, I suppose?"

"How did you guess, Mr. Flint?"

"It's my training," replied the older man, equally drily. "And the other lot"?

"Same motive, the money. Only they know where it is, even if it's a bit out of reach at the moment. So this other lot will be wanting to make very sure I don't talk to anybody."

Flint's head shook sadly in reproof. "Come out of your dream world, Briscott," he urged. "You can quit hoping, and you can quit worrying, too. Face facts, for God's sake! You're at over 20,000 feet and handcuffed to a police officer. There's an armoured van waiting at Heathrow, a military escort and a very specially prepared cell at Brixton."

"But these people are desperate," Briscott murmured uncertainly. "Both lots. And you police have no monopoly of organization."

And Flint, instinctively alert to that alternating hope and fear in his prisoner's voice, knew that Briscott could be right and mentally started yet again to review the complex arrangements. Here and now there was no problem, but from the moment the aircraft touched down. . . .

Forward in the cramped galley the girl kept slopping the drinks she was pouring. Slopping and swearing.

"Steady, child, steady," teased her male companion, off hand as he deftly arranged his trolley which he was about to wheel into the First Class section. "Can't afford to waste that stuff, even if you did have a dirty night in gay Napoli!"

She started, and nearly spilt again. Then froze inside. How could he possibly know? Yet in the same breath she assured herself that he couldn't. The steward hadn't even been in the same hotel. This was no more than the usual puerile banter of his kind.

As soon as the man had manoeuvred himself and the trolley through the curtain, she pushed her tray aside and half clam-

bered on to the metal work table, trying to peer through the tiny window. But outside it was fully dark now, and all she met was the staring reflection of her own frightened features.

She slid slowly back and stood slumped and hesitant, knowing what she had got to do, yet loathe to make the move.

Remembering, too, every chilling word that man who had slipped into her room last night had said. If she refused, then, sure, there would be reason enough for her to feel scared. As indeed any girl should, who had been unwise enough to succumb to the temptation of two-way smuggling over several months and stood now in danger of being given away. But the alternative was so simple, and certainly nothing to get frightened about. Position a canvas bag; the right drink to the right man at the right time; three whispered words to another; a minute's sensible co-operation with a third.

That was all. No one was going to get hurt, she needn't worry about that. Nor would she ever be suspected, because the blame would automatically fall on another.

She was trapped. Without choice. As the man had remarked, from all he'd heard Holloway was no kind of a place for a girl of her tastes and talents.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. We shall be crossing the coast in about ten minutes' time, but we have light cloud cover over most of France, so I am afraid you are unlikely to see anything much. We are estimating London airport . . ."

The voice ran on, its educated, unhurried tone in itself a soothing assurance of another routine flight. But the girl in the galley was no longer heeding. The opening sentence had told her all she required to know.

Eleven glasses. Only one beer, so no danger of any error there. Still ten minutes to the coast. Better play safe and serve the drinks working from front to rear.

Biting at her lower lip to control its tremble, she glanced guardedly over her shoulder, at the same time fumbling for the pellet.

As promised, it dissolved in the instant.

God, but Flint needed that beer! It seemed like all of half an hour since he had ordered the thing, and for the last ten minutes he had had to endure the added misery of watching its interrupted progress down the aisle. Had he not been tethered to Briscott, he would long since have made forward and grabbed it.

"Cheers!" he now called automatically.

And crumpled as instantly as the drug itself had dissolved.

Alert though Briscott was, for a moment he was caught off balance, before relief flooded in. What had happened was one of a choice of moves, and he knew now precisely the part he had got to play. Already he could feel his sweat welling and trickling as mind and body braced themselves to ride out the breathless minutes that must follow.

It was like being a physical part of the speeded, jerky sequence of an old movie.

He was calling out that his neighbour was ill. The girl, more agitated by far than she should have been, was scurrying back to lift Flint's lolling head and dab uselessly at his forehead. A balding, paunchy man was there next, saying he was a doctor and taking over from the girl. "Help me to get him lying flat on the floor," he wheezed—and feigned startled astonishment as the raincoat slipped and exposed the bracelets. "Key's in his jacket right pocket," Briscott snapped. "Go on, girl, you know what to do." Then she was prodding clumsily at the locks, and whispering "Under your seat," her eyes urgently searching his for acknowledgement.

Not without difficulty, Flint was worked out of his place and stretched prone on the floor.

The doctor wasted no time. His part was even shorter and simpler than the girl's, but like her he understood the price of bungling.

"Probably heart," he panted. "Ask the Captain if he can come down to below ten thousand. Quickly, Miss, please."

Thankfully, the girl hurried away forward.

The doctor started to loosen Flint's tie.

Masked from the other passengers by this activity, Briscott

slid quietly into the now vacant aisle seat. He calculated he had about thirty seconds to wait.

The Captain's announcement coincided with the dying whine of the cut turbines and the aircraft's instant but smooth change of angle. "We are starting a rapid descent, ladies and gentlemen, down to ten thousand feet because of the sudden illness of one of our passengers. Please fasten your seat belts, because we shall be going down rather more steeply than normal. There is no cause at all for worry, and ten thousand will be a perfectly safe height."

The aircraft's accelerating tilt was Briscott's signal.

Only the doctor was aware that he had slipped round to the rear of the seats. The other passengers were too occupied untangling and fastening their belts, and if one or two were glancing over their shoulders their attention was on the figure stretched on the floor.

Ice calm in action, Briscott unzipped the canvas bag and drew out the neatly folded webbing, his reflexes snapping back six years to when pulling on a harness like this had been almost as natural as pulling on his trousers.

Good, very good, well done someone, his racing mind registered, as he found the straps to be adjusted precisely to his size.

The heavy pack next. Two good positive locking clunks, and it became a part of himself.

The emergency door control operated smoothly. There was an instant's struggle as the still effective pressure differential sucked him into the widening gap, an impression of shouting and panic and a flurry of dust and papers about his face, then Arthur Briscott was whipped somersaulting into freedom.

He pulled at the metal ring, simultaneously tensing to meet the jerk that would accompany the canopy's flowering.

Neither came.

Instead the slashed silk trailed long and loose, a comet plummeting across the dark, deaf to the mingled screams and obscene curses of a man who knew now that he had been freed by the wrong lot.

A MAN AND HIS DOG

JOAN FOTHERINGHAM

"Try and remember, Beildan—It's all in your mind"

UNDER the willow tree it was quiet and peaceful. Beildan liked it like that nowadays. Just to sit by the water throwing stones for the dog.

He was waiting for the minister to go away before he went back to the house. Beildan was sorry for God employing a man like that, but then, we all had our problems. Beildan's problem was that they didn't understand about the dog.

The minister was leaving now. Beildan could picture him, all smiles and buck teeth. In the still evening air the voices carried clear.

"Ah well, I'm sorry to have missed seeing Beildan. I'll have a word with Dr. Williams about these—ah—hallucinations he's been having. It's wonderful what medical men can do these days.

Beildan had to strain to hear his niece's soft highland voice. "Och, it's not hallucinations at all. Just castles in the air he's making. There's no harm in Beildan."

Her husband's tone was angry. "Now Cathie, you know I'm not hard on the old man. But it's for the sake of the children. I don't want them to come to any harm."

"Och Angus, could you not let him be? He's had a lot of trouble and then to run over his own dog. No wonder he is a little bit wandered."

"Can't you see I'm trying to help him, Cathie. The trouble has addled his wits and we might as well face it."

The Reverend coughed apologetically and Beildan could imagine him shaking hands with them as he took his leave.

"Well now, you good folks, I'll be on my way and if at any time you feel I can be of any help I'll be only too pleased . . ." The voice faded away to nothingness as the minister pedalled

away down the road.

Bag of wind, thought Beildan, as he stretched his stiff limbs and heaved himself to his feet. At sixty-eight he wasn't so young any more. He was slower too and knew that he stooped a bit. He glanced down. The dog was waiting for him to pat her head and tell her that he would be back tomorrow.

Cathie was standing on the bank watching him climb up the steep slope from the stream. He ran a hand through his white hair, knowing already what she would say.

"We had the minister in, Beildan."

Beildan never spoke. She knew fine he had been hiding on purpose. He was a little ashamed of himself.

"Were you playing with the dog?"

Beildan looked at her hopefully. "Yes, Cathie. She likes me to throw stones in the water for her."

Cathie took his arm. "Beildan, you know there's no dog there. The dog is dead. She had an accident with your car. Try and remember, Beildan. It's all in your mind."

Beildan was concerned about Cathie. The big tears were trembling in her eyes. He didn't like to think he was a worry to her.

"I know that, Cathie. I wish I could forget it. But she comes back. She likes me to throw stones in the water for her."

Cathie sighed and turned away. Beildan knew she meant well—but she didn't understand.

It just so happened that Dr. Williams came up to the house a few days later. Beildan had never cared much for Dr. Williams but he had brought a friend with him. Tall and thin he was, with a sad humble expression on his face. Beildan liked the look of him. A nice man. An understanding man.

"Dr. Williams was telling me you had a lot of trouble for a while, Beildan," he said.

"Ay. Ay. A lot of trouble. But my dog was a great comfort to me at the time."

"Is that so? I'm fond of dogs myself. I have a spaniel—a grand dog. Fond of water you know."

Beildan nodded. "Ay, my dog likes the water too. I go down to the stream and play with her in the afternoons."

"You didn't lose your dog then?"

"For a time, but she's back now. That's why I go and play with her."

"Oh I see," said Dr. Williams's friend, smiling.

Beildan relaxed. "It's not everybody who understands about my dog like you do. You'll need to come down to the stream some afternoon with me, if you can spare the time."

"I'd like to do that, Beildan. Yes, I'd like that very much."

They all had tea then and although it was only early evening Beildan came over very sleepy and never saw the going of Dr. Williams and his kind friend.

When Beildan woke up he wasn't in his own bed. He wasn't even in his own house. He couldn't remember taking ill but he thought he must have, because there he was, in hospital. It didn't take him long to find out that it wasn't an ordinary hospital—it was a hospital for queer people. Everybody in it was mad. Except Beildan. Mind you, he was glad the dog had come with him. He would have felt pretty lost there without the dog.

Dr. Williams's kind friend came round to see him, wearing a white coat.

His tone was benevolent. "Hullo Beildan. You're looking pretty fit. How is your dog these days?"

So he had remembered the dog.

"Oh she's fine, just fine."

"You're not missing her too much, are you?"

"Missing her!" Beildan chuckled. "How could I be missing her and her lying on the bed here beside me?"

The man laughed and patted the dog just to show how well he understood.

He patted Beildan too. "Well, we're going to help you to forget all your troubles. We'll soon have you well again."

He was such a nice man that Beildan did not like to tell him he had never been ill in his life.

As the days passed Beildan forgot his troubles. He forgot who he was and where he lived. Everything Beildan forgot. Except the dog. And how could he forget the dog when she was there, beside his hand, on the bed with her tail thumping his feet?

Gradually Beildan came to understand that they were going to take the dog away from him. He knew that the dog was the only thing that was keeping him sane so he decided to hide the dog. When the doctor came round—for Beildan knew now that he was a doctor—he would ask where the dog was and Beildan would look surprised and say, "What dog? I never saw any dog in here," knowing fine that the dog was hiding under the bed all the time. And the doctor would smile and tell Beildan he would soon get home now.

Beildan was glad to be home again. He took a walk down to the stream but never sat under the willow tree for he knew that they were keeping a close eye on him.

He knew he had to forget the dog.

As time passed they gradually watched him less and less until they didn't watch him at all. He heard Angus speaking to the minister one evening, "Ay, he's quite all right now. Got over it at last."

Now that he was well, Cathie and Angus began taking the children to visit their Granny in the village on Saturdays. Beildan always watched them until they were out of sight round the corner of the road.

Then he hurried down to the stream, sat under the willow tree and threw stones in the water for the dog.



THE ARABIAN BOTTLE

B. M. MOONEY

Trembling, I began to lift it . . .

Illustrated by Oriol Bath

SLOWLY, then with a rushing clarity, consciousness returned to me. I was standing in the hallway of my home, but I did not see the orderly display to which I was accustomed. Instead, the guttering flame from an old gas-mantle revealed shattered ruin. Behind me, the door of the study moved creakingly back and forth, swayed by the wind that blew from the entrance lobby. The front door, which had been stoutly constructed from oak, was rent apart, as though by gargantuan hands.

At the foot of the stairs was an antique hat-stand, and by the hat-stand, there lay in pathetic stillness the carcass of Old Bill, my mastiff. The poor creature had been grotesquely mutilated: his eyes were still open, and his powerful fangs were bared in a rictus of hate. But the head had been hideously torn from the body!

Oddly, as I gazed at the rigid body, I felt no twinge of horror or even of regret. Oddly, for I had loved the dog.

Nor did the devastation of the hallway stir my feelings greatly. I was conscious only of a vague disquiet. A glance up the staircase indicated that there had been similar spoliation of the upper floor. Although I am not normally a courageous man I decided to investigate.

It occurred to me as I mounted the stairs that I had come through the apparent carnage unscathed. Physically and mentally I had a sense of well-being, a sense almost of euphoria. Even the icy wind that was driving snowflakes through the gaping doorway to form a swirling pool at the end of the corridor failed to distract me.

The upper floor was similarly desolated. Windows were fragmented, furniture was crushed and splintered; destruction was

complete. It was as if a whirlwind had vent its fury on my home. What force, I wondered, could have caused such havoc. What agency, natural or unnatural, could have wreaked such damage?

And as I pondered, an inundation of memory erupted into my mind. The bottle! The bottle from the sea! The flask that bore on its base the peculiar and intriguing legend commencing: *'In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful . . .'*

It must have been the bottle . . . and yet how could so prosaic an object occasion such wanton injury? What nonsense! But as I descended the stairway once more I reconstructed in my mind the events leading to the opening of the bottle . . .

I am a man of private means and antiquarian tastes. I live alone, save for Old Bill, my simple needs being tended by a woman who comes in from the village each day. I try to retain in my house, as far as is possible, all that is graceful of yesteryear. Plumbing and cooking facilities are the only concessions to modernity that I allow. I collect books and curiosities—not, I hasten to add, what are euphemistically described as curiosities in certain sleazy bookshops. No, I leave the gathering of obscenity and erotica to those who have no other interests.

My curiosities are mostly artefacts of an eldritch or an occult nature. For example, I have an arthame, a sacrificial knife, that once belonged to Gilles de Retz. Much of my modest collection has come to me from Mr. Boscombe, a desiccated little art-dealer who deals in the unusual and the bizarre. It was Mr. Boscombe who brought the Arabian bottle to me.

He had come to see me early in the afternoon, and had placed the bottle on my desk with a triumphant flourish. "There you are, Mr. Sutton," he had crowed, "a nice little rarity for you." He told me a little of the bottle's history. It had been netted from the Red Sea by a young Arab fisherman, who had sold it to a merchant seaman. He in his turn had taken it to Boscombe as a curio. "I've cleaned it up a bit, Mr. Sutton, and I thought you might be interested."

I examined the bottle. It was made of stone, and was squat

as are some cognac bottles. Around the base was an arabesque pattern. The stopper, a large one, had been sealed with some heavy waxen substance. I looked up at the little man and told him, "Hardly a rarity, Mr. Boscombe. Perhaps 1,500 years old or thereabouts—a commonplace Arab bottle of the period. I will admit that it's remarkably well preserved. Probably abnormally thick. Most museums have examples equally as fine."

Boscombe looked a little hurt. "Oh, come now, sir, I have never once been guilty of bringing you anything mundane. I promise you, sir, I think this item is most uncommon. You're no mean scholar of Arabic, Mr. Sutton, read the inscription."

I lifted the flask and peered myopically. What I had assumed to be a decorative pattern was in fact faded and archaic Arabic script. I donned my spectacles and picked my way through the wording: *'In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Hadj the Wise hath set the Seal at the bidding of Haroun-al-Raschid, Caliph of Caliphs. Suffer not the Seal to be sundered, for it is the will of Allah that the Djinn remain immured for eternity. Blessed be the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.'*

Boscombe spoke eagerly, "Doesn't it remind you of the stories of the THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS?"

In a burst of collector's enthusiasm I nodded. "Yes, it does indeed. The legends of the elementals being incarcerated by the Faithful. Yes, Boscombe, I will purchase your Arabian bottle. It'll make an interesting conversation piece when I have some of my friends in to dine. How much are you asking?"

He named a modest sum, I wrote a cheque, and we parted with mutual compliments. Having seen him from the premises I returned to my study, to choose a suitable setting for my new treasure.

I selected a place, and lifted the bottle to put it in position. It seemed to me that I detected a slight sound from within the vessel so I gave it a shake. Sure enough, there was a slight slopping sound that whetted my curiosity. Here was a find! An ancient flask that still contained the original filling. I resolved

that after dinner I would attempt to loosen the sealing agent and remove the stopper from the artefact. Although the possibilities were several, I decided that the contents were likely to be some virulent poison. In my mind I was attempting to justify the sealing of the flask and the casting of it into the sea. Perhaps some long-dead chemist had discovered a toxin that had frightened him with its power. The dire inscription, I surmised, would serve to ward off the superstitious.

That I hurried my dinner was indicative of my keen desire to investigate the flask more thoroughly, and I sat fretting while my bucolic Mrs. Beeton removed the crockery in her leisurely way. After what seemed to be an interminable delay, she bade me goodnight and left the house. I retired hastily to my study, Old Bill at my heels, his great tail lashing happily. I fired the gas-lamps and settled at my desk with the bottle. The stopper was very firmly fixed in the neck of the jar, and I was obliged to take a paper-knife to begin the long and tedious task of chipping away the ancient wax. As I worked, my mind raced ahead flitting moth-like from one wondrous thought to another. Probably I was wrong in my assumption that the bottle contained a toxic substance. It might well be some centuried vintage, a heady wine served to the courtiers of Bagdad—but no! the Q’ran forbade wine—well then, say a rare perfume, or a spicy unguent. Oh, how I would be able to crow to my antiquarian friends!

Suddenly, the last fragment of the seal fell away and the stopper was loose beneath my fingers. Trembling, I began to lift it, then I realised that I had become uncharacteristically agitated, and I sat back in my huge armchair, forcing calmness. When I felt that I had regained my customary phlegm, I leaned forward, and in an almost disinterested manner withdrew the stopper. As I did so, an odour of dank decay, and the merest suggestion of a smoky curl, seemed to rise with the plug...

I paused at the bottom of the stairs, once more to look upon the stiffening carcass of Old Bill, my companion of many years. And again I was disturbed by my lack of emotion. I realised



that I had not yet surveyed the study for damage. I crossed the hall and entered that room, which was only faintly illuminated by the surviving gas-lamp in the hall.

The door was creaking ominously in the wind. On the floor, scattered to different parts of the room, lay shards of the stone bottle. I lifted my head, and was startled to see a figure sitting at my desk. The figure was rigidly still, and was obscured by the shadows. And as I stood there, a cloud withdrew from the face of the moon, a beam of light slanted through the window and lighted the visage of the chair's occupant.

The face was turgid with death. And on the face was a grimace of horror that would remain until corruption brought about the final dissolution.

It was my own face!

THE CORRIDOR BETWEEN

P. MASON

"You're dead man, dead"

SLOWLY Jim picked himself up from the floor and looked at his surroundings. Breathing heavily through his teeth Jim felt himself all over.

He faintly remembered having the wind knocked out of him, but the exploration of his body found no injury. He felt no pain either. Profoundly puzzled about his whereabouts, yet not altogether disturbed, Jim ran his fingers through his hair and said more to himself. "Where the heck am I?" "What's happened to me?" "You're dead man, dead as the proverbial door nail."

A voice had answered his question, a voice out of nowhere. Jim spun around in surprise and disbelief.

"Where are you?" he cried. He had been sure that the room was empty.

"Where are you?" he cried again, a little frightened now.

"Easy man, easy," the voice came again, "I'm over by here."

Jim spun round in the opposite direction, then stopped when he saw, sitting against the farthest wall, a negro soldier, holding a rifle across his knees.

Jim was sure he wasn't there before.

"Who are you? and what did you mean, dead?"

The negro shifted the rifle to an upright position.

"Abraham Lincoln Jackson's the name. How do you do?"

His voice was quiet and lyrical.

A giggle rose in Jim's throat. The name and the situation was ridiculous to him.

The soldier was not offended.

"Yea, my name's been laughed at all my life. My folks wanted so much to be an all-American family that they named all their kids after past presidents."

Ab. shifted his position to sit on his heels, the rifle still across his knees.

Jim moved cautiously towards him.

"Er, what did you mean? You know, what you said before."

"That you are dead?"

"Yes."

"Well we are both dead, this is the hereafter, man."

The giggle rose up in Jim's throat again.

"This is a joke," he thought, "a silly damned joke."

"Easy man, easy," said Ab. again.

The calm voice stemmed Jim's hysteria, he tried to suppress it altogether.

"This is a joke, isn't it? You are having me on, aren't you?"

Ab. eyed Jim closely. He could see he was as calm as he'd ever be in such a situation.

"No, it is not a joke," he began cautiously, "think, what was the last thing you remember before now?"

Jim stared at him. What had he been doing before he got here? Wherever here was.

He had started out to work in a bad temper; yes he remembered that. The car won't start, Jayne, his wife would have to call the garage while he was in work.

She made a joke of it; her good humour always chased his blues away and he felt fit to face the rush hour crowds.

He'd kissed her passionately. Tonight they were going to a night-club to celebrate their twenty-first wedding anniversary.

A smile crossed his lips as he thought of Jayne in her pink cocktail dress. She hadn't had an occasion to wear it in a long time, and she looked so young and beautiful in it. She was a good wife; couldn't get a better one than Jayne.

Jim's thoughts turned to the crowds of commuters pushing and jogging as he made his way to the escalators of the underground. Thoughts of Jayne were pushed to the back of his mind as he concentrated on keeping his feet in the crush. Twice he nearly fell. He wished he'd taken a taxi, but taxis went into hiding during the rush hour.

His bad temper revived in full force, and he began to give tit

for tat. An elbow here a knee there. His umbrella came into use also until finally he arrived on the correct platform.

An express thundered through the station, leaving behind it a whirlwind of dust and toffee papers; half the grit, he felt, was in his eyes.

The crowd had taken a step back when the express went through, leaving Jim to the front rubbing his grit filled eyes.

The 9.30 uptown train was heard in the tube and the crowd stepped forward again, and Jim, trying to clean his blinded eyes, had to brace his back against the crush. They were pushing him to the edge. Scenes flashed in Jim's mind. He was blinded with grit, the train was coming out of the tunnel. He couldn't keep his balance.

The roar of the train filled his ears; there seemed to be another surge forward, he felt someone push him, push him over the edge of the platform . . . pushing him over and down on to the live rails. There was a flash, screams . . . yes he remembered it all. The flash as his body hit the live rails . . . the screams as the train went over him . . . and the pain, the excruciating pain. He could still hear the screams rising in a never ending crescendo. Suddenly Jim realized the screams were not in his mind, they were coming from his own mouth. . . .

He became aware that Ab. was standing next to him, his eyes filled with fright and concern.

Somehow Ab. looked very comical and Jim ceased screaming and began to laugh; wild belly laughs, tears flowed down his cheeks.

All much to Ab.'s discomfiture.

As suddenly as it began, the laughter stopped. Jim took great gulps of air in an effort to pull himself together.

Ab. took a step nearer to him.

"You O.K.?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm O.K.," Jim answered, wiping his eyes and face in his sleeve.

"You were right Ab. I am dead."

The negro still looked warily at him.

"You've remembered?" he said huskily.

"Yes," Jim said with great sadness, "I remember."

He briefly told Ab. the ending of his earthly life, who listened intently without asking any questions.

"That's bad, man, bad. As bad as I got."

The negro went back to sitting on his heels, and Jim sat next to him. Both fell silent. The rifle had disappeared. Neither was surprised, rifles, they felt, were out of place here.

They were waiting now, waiting for something to happen.

Jim recalled having this same sense of suspension once before, when waiting for the results of an important interview he once had. Jim smiled and then chuckled to himself.

Ab. looked in alarm.

"It's all right Ab. I was just thinking. I know your name but you don't know mine. You haven't even asked."

"Introduce yourself sir," Ab. said with a mock half bow.

Jim bowed in return.

"Messr Jim Parker, senior partner of Parker, Percival and Montaque, solicitors. How do you do?"

"How do you do, Mr. Parker of Parker, Percival and Montaque, solicitors."

They shook hands and laughed at their childish fun.

All tension was gone and time, if there was time, slipped quietly by. Jim looked around. He was in a room with tall walls which just went up, no ceiling, just walls going up.

The silence was not oppressive, in fact it was soothing, with a feeling of being back in the womb.

Jim felt like a child again and just a little apprehensive of being rejected. The big question which kept flitting through his mind was, "Will He let me in?"

"Ab."

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I ask you how you . . . er . . . died?"

"No, I don't mind. It was in Vietnam. . . ."

Ab. let his mind go back once more over the events which brought him to this place.

"My platoon was lying in ambush. God it was hot in that jungle, flies and creepy crawlies got in everywhere under our

clothes. You wanted to have a good scratch, but any movement brought a burst of lead from the V.C.s."

Ab. gave a cynical laugh.

"We in ambush! That's a laugh. The V.C.s were everywhere. They were waiting for us. Didn't let on they were there until we were in position, then one by one they popped us off. It was hell, all the guys killed or hit bad. Couldn't relieve ourselves; and those blasted insects . . . all day they kept us pinned down, we couldn't move."

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he thought back. He was speaking more to himself now and was quite unaware of Jim beside him.

"The silence . . . in between shots . . . and every shot meant one of the guys had bought it. You know, I never saw one of the V.C.s at any time . . . no one saw them, but they were all around us. Then the sun came up again. The heat boiled us in our own sweat. For hours there would be no sound, and you'd poke your head up to take a look; hoping to Christ they had all gone home, then bang . . . bang . . . bang, someone would have his head blown off. There was only four of us left out of the whole platoon. Four. It was hopeless and we knew it. Then we heard them, they were moving in for the kill, the bastards. Well we were not going to take it lying down. Like the four musketeers we stood up, firing from the hip and as scared as hell. Funny, but they didn't fire back. They waited until we were in a clearing. We didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. I caught a packet . . . in the head."

Jim did not speak at once. Pity and compassion overwhelmed him. He put his arms gently around the negro, holding him close.

Time passed, calming, healing the scars of bad memories. They wondered what was to come.

"Ab.," Jim said quietly, "do you . . . um . . . think we are going to meet . . . er . . . Him?"

Ab. quivered visibly and nodded his head.

"I guess so," he said a little pensively. "I wonder what He looks like."

"Yes," said Jim, "I wonder what He looks like. Do you think He is like the pictures we have seen of Him?"

Ab. shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. You know Jim. I've never thought of what He looks like before. He was just there . . . God . . . A something, I don't know, never thought of it before. Do you think we should have?"

"I don't know, but it's too late now. . . ."

Heavy silence fell between them. Each wondering and yet knowing it was too late now.

"Jim, I haven't a hope," said Ab. desperately, "Do you think He will let us in?"

The same question filled Jim's mind, and at the same time he wanted to know what He looked like.

Both began to hope and wonder at the same time.

Suddenly the room elongated into a long corridor.

The two men stood up and began walking. Both very fearful and full of insecurity.

Neither spoke, but took comfort from the other's presence.

In front of them appeared a booth, veiled by a chiffon-like curtain, which stirred gently by an unfelt breeze.

As though from a signal, Ab. left Jim's side and stepped into the booth and disappeared from sight.

"This is it," thought Jim, "I wonder what He looks like. Will He let me in? Please God, let me in, don't turn me back."

He saw Ab. walking on up the corridor, his face aglow with joy.

"Ab. Ab. wait . . . wait for me." His voice fell on deaf ears.

He tried to follow, but was stopped by an invisible barrier, and Ab. went on, unhearing.

Jim continued waving in an attempt to catch Ab.'s eye, but he knew it was hopeless, to reach Ab. was to go through the booth, and then only if he was let in.

"Oh, please God, let me in," he prayed desperately.

His time of reckoning had come . . . now he would know. Squaring his shoulders Jim faced the booth. Taking a deep breath . . . he entered. . . .

Meanwhile back on earth. . .

A group of black-clad mourners stand around the newly occupied grave. Jim's widow leans heavily on the arm of a relative, weeping profusely.

The vicar recites in a droning voice, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The widow cries aloud as the first handful of earth is thrown down onto the coffin. Then she is taken firmly, but gently away from the graveside, into a waiting car, and driven away.

In a clearing, somewhere in Vietnam, a black cloud of flies rises and then resettles upon the half eaten corpses of a platoon of American soldiers.

Typed on a clean official form, and neatly filed away was their epitaph . . . MISSING, PRESUMED KILLED IN ACTION.



The bell struck one, and shook the silent tower;
The graves give up their dead: fair Elenor
Walked by the castle gate, and looked in.
A hollow groan ran thro' the dreary vaults.

She shrieked aloud, and sunk upon the steps,
On the cold stone her pale cheeks. Sickly smells
Of death issue as from a sepulchre,
And all is silent but the sighing vaults.

From *Fair Elenor*
WILLIAM BLAKE

IMAGINATION WILL BE THE DEATH OF YOU

JOAN GOODING

*The hand descended on my shoulder
without warning . . .*

Now don't forget what I told you," said Grandmother, looking down forbiddingly at me as I stood kicking up the gravel of the driveway. "No going through the barbed wire into Mr. Brunner's garden: he doesn't like trespassers."

"Why?" I asked, not very politely. "Does he keep skeletons in the cupboards, or just a spy ring operating from the cellar?"

Grandmother pursed her hard, lipless mouth, and gave me a chilling look. The light glinted on her thick spectacles, so that for a moment it seemed as though there were only empty eye sockets behind the lenses. "Imagination," she snapped disapprovingly, "will be the death of you. What a girl of your age needs is more discipline, and not so many trashy comics to read." With a final disparaging glance at my grubby jeans and crumpled sweater, she turned and went back into the hall.

The front door of Frogmore Lodge clanged shut behind her, excluding daylight, and fresh air, and me, as though we were all undesirable intruders.

It was a horrible old house, full of unexpected, tortuous stairways designed to trip the unwary, and funereal rooms smelling of horsehair sofas and generations of damp, cold winters. The sun was never allowed to shine through the windows, which were heavily curtained in dusty velvet, and kept permanently closed, by Grandmother's express order.

Most of the rooms were unused, for she never did any entertaining. I would often stand outside the locked doors, listening, and letting my imagination roam over the shuttered

mysteries within: the long, coffin-shaped sideboards, the monstrous, toad-like shapes of armchairs beneath their concealing dust sheets, the cobwebbed portraits of former owners who had struggled to survive, like anaemic, drooping plants in a twilit world.

I knew where Grandmother kept the keys to her locked rooms, but I'd never dared use them. It was the thought of the hooded eyes in those portraits which daunted me. I imagined myself closing the heavy door behind me, and how the eyes would fasten on me with a wide, unblinking stare; how they would follow me, menacingly, as I crept around touching the cold, slippery shapes of the furniture.

Suppose I got locked in one of those dead rooms? The eyes would be triumphant, then: and how they would gloat, as I screamed and beat despairingly on the locked door which would keep me a prisoner for ever in the gloom!

I often lay awake at night, listening to the mournful cries of unseen owls, and thinking about those rooms. On my way down to breakfast in the morning, I would pass the locked doors with an uneasy glance and a long, pleasurable shudder.

Grandmother was disappointed in me, that had seemed obvious from our first meeting, a few weeks ago. Girls should be prettily dressed, neat and tidy, well-mannered and respectful. I was none of these things.

This was my first visit to Frogmore Lodge. My parents had lived abroad since before my birth; my mother and I only returned to England because of the sudden death of my father. Then, as if things weren't bad enough, mother fell ill and had to go into hospital. There was no one else to look after me, so I'd been sent, protesting, to stay with Grandmother.

You know, I love gardens, as a rule; but I didn't like hers. There were no flowers, only dark, tangled laurels and holly bushes growing thickly beneath towering, interlacing branches. Even the soil seemed blighted: sour and sickly, with pallid, twisted tree roots poking through it, as though struggling to free themselves from some hateful prison, as I longed to escape from mine.

I walked moodily down the dank, overgrown driveway, where trailing branches caught at my clothes with taloned, spiteful fingers. I soon reached the shrubbery which bounded Grandmother's property.

I'd never really tried to find the boundary wire before, mainly because the holly bushes grew so thickly at the end of the garden it seemed impossible to find a path through them. But I felt bored, lonely, rebellious: I'd have done anything, just then, to enliven the tedium of my existence with Grandmother.

When I finally tore myself free from the barbed embrace of the holly bushes, I was breathless, my arms and legs raked with deep, cruel scratches from which the blood welled. I parted the strands of barbed wire and crawled through into Mr. Brunner's garden.

My stomach gave a nasty, sickening lurch as I thought of what might happen if I were caught, but I didn't care at that moment. I'd managed to invade the forbidden territory at last.

As I walked cautiously away from the boundary fence, the strangest feeling took possession of me, for Mr. Brunner's garden was exactly like Grandmother's: sunless, gloomy, and forbidding. I felt like Alice as she went through the crystal barrier of the looking glass: I was in the same world, yet this was an alien landscape, unknown and unexplored, reality in reverse.

Mr. Brunner's house, when I reached it, was like Grandmother's too: tall, grey, over-ornate, obviously built in the Victorian age, when surely the ugliest architecture of all came into being.

As I stood in the shelter of the trees, looking up at the leprous walls, the Gothic windows and fake battlements of crumbling stone, I listened intently. Except for the loud, uneven beating of my heart, everything seemed unnaturally still.

No wind stirred the thick, fleshy leaves of the laurels; no birdsong, no barking of dogs nor distant music broke the silence which hung around that house.

The hand descended on my shoulder without any warning. I hadn't heard a sound, no rustling of leaves, no crackling sticks underfoot, to herald the approach of anyone through the bushes.

I stood rooted to the spot, speechless with terror. My heart thumped sickeningly; perspiration trickled, icy-cold, down my back, and my scalp crawled. Both of us, myself and Mr. Brunner (for I felt sure that it was he) stood for a timeless moment, for what seemed an age, without speaking. Then the hand tightened on my shoulder and turned me round, slowly, inexorably.

"Who are you?" he said. "This is private land; surely you know that?" His voice was very soft and smooth, like the silk of a shroud: it caressed me coldly, hatefully. He didn't sound English, somehow: there was the faintest trace of an accent there, though what it was, I couldn't define.

I daren't look up at him, but kept my eyes fixed on the polished toes of his narrow black shoes. "I'm . . . staying here," I stammered, "With my grandmother, Mrs. Fontaine."

"Of course! I should have guessed, shouldn't I? Mrs. Fontaine is a very dear friend of mine: we have many interests in common." And he laughed, quietly. It was a dreadful laugh which set my teeth on edge. I wanted to put my hands over my ears to shut out the sound; I wanted to turn and run, but his fingers held my shoulder like a vice, keeping me there.

And what if I *had* torn myself out of his grasp, and tried to escape? My imagination painted a nightmare picture of myself running wildly through that tangled, impeding undergrowth towards the boundary wire, with him in pursuit of me, gaining on me, grabbing me. . . .

His voice seemed, suddenly, to be coming from a long way off. "You don't look very well. Let me take you inside and you can sit down whilst I send a message to Mrs. Fontaine."

He led me into the house. Through the waves of faintness which threatened to overwhelm me, I was conscious of being in a long, dim corridor, with many closed doors opening off it. Then he took me into a room and helped me into a chair,

where I sat gripping the arms desperately.

When the sickening buzzing in my ears had faded, I opened my eyes and found myself looking straight into Mr. Brunner's.

They were hooded and deep-set, the eyelids wrinkled and devoid of lashes. Wide and unblinking, the pupils seemed enormous, filling all the irises.

I shrank back into the chair with a gasp as he held a glass of water to my lips. My teeth chattered violently against the rim of the tumbler; my hand shook uncontrollably as I took it from him.

My fascinated glance took in every detail of his appearance as he sat down on the opposite side of the gloomy marble fireplace. He was immensely tall and bony; black hair was plastered thinly across his domed, balding skull. His ears were large and pointed, like a faun's, and the skin of his face looked dry and lifeless, parchment-yellow. I couldn't meet his eyes again; I couldn't bear to: I kept my gaze fixed firmly on his shoes.

"I've sent someone to fetch your grandmother," he said. "She will be coming over presently to collect you." Then, as I sat mute, he continued, "She was telling me you've lived all your life abroad. Where, exactly?"

"Borneo," I mumbled, praying desperately that Grandmother would hurry and rescue me from this terrifying man, who filled me with such inexplicable revulsion.

"I wondered if you might have been in Germany. Such a beautiful country! My family owned land there for centuries. I would still be there now, living on my own estates, had it not been for a certain unpleasantness between myself and my tenants." He laughed, mirthlessly.

"Unpleasantness?" I was hardly listening: all my senses were stretched taut, desperately willing Grandmother to come.

Suddenly, unbidden, there came into my mind the picture story I'd been reading that morning; the lurid illustrations had particularly appealed to me. The story concerned two brothers who'd lived in a medieval castle in the Hartz Mountains. From there, they had terrorized the whole district.

For they were vampires. Those pictures, so vividly drawn, had portrayed the skull-like faces, the peculiarly shaped ears, the sharp teeth which left tell-tale punctures in the necks of their pitiful victims. . . .

For the first time, I noticed what Mr. Brunner was wearing : an old fashioned, caped overcoat. As he lifted his arms, the dark grey cape looked exactly like outstretched wings; as he smiled at me, I saw, with horror, that his eye-teeth were immensely long, gleaming and yellowish, the points needle-sharp. . . .

I was still screaming as I reached the door and hurled myself through it. The corridor, dim and vaulted, with its shadowed corners, seemed to close in on me; then I remember no more for a long, long time.

I must have been ill, for weeks, I suppose. I was vaguely aware, through the fog of delirium, that I was back in my room at Grandmother's house. Towards the end of my illness, my mother hovered, a comforting presence, near my bedside; I clung constantly to her, whimpering, and begging her to take me away from that awful place, and Mr. Brunner.

On the second day of my convalescence, they led me out into the garden: Grandmother stalking ahead, wearing her most disapproving air, and mother, with her arm around my waist, helping me through the thickest parts of the undergrowth.

When I saw where they were leading me, I started shaking like a leaf. "Please, mother, not there! I can't bear it. Don't take me there, please!"

But mother's soft mouth was set in a firm, decisive line. "I'm sorry, darling, I really am. I know you've been very ill, and terribly frightened, but we have to make you *see*. . . ."

And when they had made a path between the holly bushes, and led me through to the boundary wire, I saw . . .

I just couldn't believe it. I clung to the wire, the sun warm on my face, whilst my mind tottered on the brink of a bottomless abyss into which I feared to fall.

Beyond the wire stretched a lush green meadow, dappled with clover and buttercups. On the far side stood a clump of

elms and some red-roofed farm buildings; I could see a paddock and an orchard, with trees bowed beneath their heavy burden of fruit.

I found my voice at last. "But I did see it, mother, I *did*! The garden, and the house, and . . . him."

I swung round to face Grandmother. "It was you who told me Mr. Brunner lived there, and I wasn't to go into his garden. You *told* me, that afternoon: you can't deny it!"

"I told you that to stop you going out of the garden. Heaven knows what mischief you might have got up to at the farm if you'd gone across the field. A Mr. Brunner *did* live here, a long time ago. The house was pulled down after he died; there hasn't been a house or garden here for at least thirty years."

"But I went into the house, I tell you! I *spoke* to him. . . ."

"Rubbish!" Grandmother's voice was like ice. "I have never, in all my life, known such a stupid child. Imagination will be the . . ."

I put my hands over my ears. "Don't say it!" I whispered. "Don't you *dare* say it!"

Indeed, I couldn't have borne her to say it: for I knew, only too well, that it was true.



A TRUE LIMBO

JOHN NEWALL

*She looked away uneasily, first at the floor,
then towards . . .*

“**T**HERE is just one thing I should mention,” the farmer’s wife added.

She sounded hesitant and even embarrassed, and I found myself apprehensive about what was going to follow. I had several weeks of post graduate work to catch up with—the penalty of having succumbed to the temptation of an autumn holiday—and this room in a Cotswold farm seemed just the right kind of quiet and comfortable spot. I had no wish to search any further, and I only hoped the lady was not about to produce some last-minute difficulty.

I stayed silent, contenting myself with very slightly raising my forehead in invitation that she should carry on.

“The room’s haunted, you see.”

Now this I certainly had not expected. I was all prepared for something about a month’s rent in advance, or that she liked to lock up early at night, or perhaps a warning about smoking. But . . . haunted. That’s not the sort of remark to which one has any ready-made reaction.

So I still said nothing, instead lifting my forehead a shade higher and adding a trace of a patronising smile.

“Not the room, really, but that clock,” the woman continued, moving her head in the direction of a grandfather clock, which was almost easier to hear than see, as it ticked away in a gloomy corner between the big fireplace and a massive cupboard.

“Haunted in what way?” I prompted.

“Well,” she started; only to stop, plainly still embarrassed. She seemed a sturdy enough, down-to-earth and sensible person, and I realised afterwards that she must have been torn between not wishing to sound ridiculous, and something which

she nonetheless knew to be fact; or, let us say, to which she could find no explanation.

"It always stops at eleven o'clock at night," she resumed with a rush. "And then it starts again at midnight."

"What! On its own you mean?"

"That's right."

She told the story, then.

An elderly couple, called Carter—the husband a retired watch and clock craftsman—had lived many years together in this room. A real Darby and Joan they had been, utterly devoted, and since they were both invalids they had rarely moved out of the place, which had thus become the focal point of their lives. Then unexpectedly one night just over a year ago the wife had died; though no one had known this until the next morning when my companion had as usual come in with the breakfast, and found the dazed old man on his knees beside the bed.

He had stayed on for a few weeks after the funeral, but he was quite broken and lost on his own, and after a while some relatives had been found, and they had arranged for the old fellow to go into a home in Battersea. Where in fact he still was.

It was only just as he was leaving that he had drawn tearful attention to the clock. When his wife had died, he had said pathetically, time in this room had stopped: in future it would always stop at eleven o'clock at night—and would stay stopped for a whole hour, until a new day was born at midnight.

"Poor old chap," I murmured. "But surely you're not telling me that Mr. Carter still somehow manages to control that clock!"

But the woman was nodding hard that this was just what she was telling me. That was the whole point. At eleven o'clock every night the clock did stop, and precisely at midnight it started again, the hands swiftly moving through the lost hour to catch up and settle at the correct time.

"Oh, surely not?" I expostulated.

She gave a nervous, apologetic laugh. It was hard to accept,

she admitted, but it was true for all that. No one had really paid any attention to the old man's words—after all, he had been distraught and seemingly hardly aware of what was going on—but that very evening after he had left, she and her husband had been in this room late, tidying up, and . . . well, she had already described what happened. For a while after that, the two of them had come in every evening to watch, but before long the thing had become commonplace and they hadn't bothered any more, and since the room was never used they had simply allowed the clock to run down.

Now, though, having decided to let the room again, they had rewound the clock. And last night it had stopped, and started again, just as it had before.

"I thought I ought to tell you," the woman tagged on, doubtfully. "You don't have to take the room if you don't like the idea."

To this I made no comment, instead moving across to take a closer and, as I intended, sceptical look. I say 'as I intended', because that's the truth. It's also the truth that as I approached I felt my scepticism retreating, and in its place just a prickle of some kind of hesitant caution.

Yet the clock seemed normal enough; to my amateur eye no different to any other grandfather, with its elaborately scrolled face, holes gaping ready for the key that would move the hands and wind the chime mechanism, and a noisy, purposeful second hand, whose each onward jerk seemed matched precisely to the pendulum, visible below through the glass panel in the door.

"Whose clock is it?" I asked. "I mean, yours or old Mr. Carter's?"

"Oh, it's ours. Been in the family as long as I can remember."

"But nothing like it has ever happened before?"

"No, never," she assured me. "Only since the old chap left."

"Well, he must have done something very ingenious to the works," I concluded, scepticism returning in full as I moved back into the room. "You did say he was a clock craftsman,

didn't you?"

She confirmed this, her tone, though, at the same time making clear that she regarded my suggestion as irrelevant. So far as this woman was concerned, that clock was bewitched. Yet, as I have said, she was a prosaic and stolid enough person.

"But surely you've had a clock repairer in to look at it? Or had a check round the works themselves?" I argued.

"No. Neither. We did think about it, but decided against it."

Puzzled, I allowed my eyes to hold hers for a moment. "Would you allow me to ask why? I should have thought it was the obvious thing to do."

She looked away uneasily, first at the floor, then towards the clock, and shrugged. "It . . . Well, it just didn't seem right. Those two . . . you see they were so very close to one another."

It was pretty clear she did not want to discuss the matter any deeper, so I left it at that, saying that I'd take the room, whatever the habits of the clock, and asking if it would be all right if I moved straight in.

Ten minutes later my cases had been brought in from the car, and I was on my own.

Quite deliberately I ignored that clock, instead busying around unpacking clothes and books, and settling the latter, together with my bundle of files and papers, on the big table by the window that was going to serve me as desk. This whole room, I assured myself, accorded well with the somewhat ponderous classical research which was going to occupy my time. No great enthusiast for modern styles, I knew instinctively that I ought to work well here in surroundings of massive dark oak and worn leather, by day with a fine view across open country, and by night sheltered behind heavy, full length burgundy coloured curtains.

Even that deep, unvarying tock-tock from the corner seemed appropriate, and conducive to scholarly concentration.

At least until eleven o'clock.

At five minutes to, I stopped work and took up position in front of the clock. First, though, I switched on every light in the room. "To light up that dark corner properly," I tried to

fool myself, but aware all the time that there was another reason which I neither could, nor really wished to define, or for that matter even admit.

"Don't be such a fool, man," I heard myself whisper aloud, as three minutes dropped to two, then two to one only, and my heart, for all my muttered pleadings, pumped louder and thumpingly heavier with every disappearing second.

I was sure, then, that the clock's face leered, and in an abrupt panic I sidled away to place myself behind the protection of the heavy sofa.

It was as I knew it would be. Precisely as the farmer's wife had described. And the silence was louder than the tock-tock, the rigid pendulum more eloquent than it ever had been in movement. This was true limbo. A halting of time.

Dead, unrecorded minutes passed before I pulled myself together and advanced cautiously towards the clock, my eyes unwavering and warily defensive on its sleeping face. Only when close to polished wood, metal hands, glass windows, and a whole assembly of gears and weights and wheels, did mechanical reality intrude sufficiently to overcome my incredulous trance.

I tried everything, then. Gingerly at first, then almost savagely, I attempted to shift the hands, and then when I found they would not budge I pounded the face. I shook the mahogany body. I opened up the front, and re-wound by pulling the weight back to the top. Finally I swung the brass pendulum, holding it high to one side before releasing it to drop.

Again I tried. And yet again. And each time what happened was impossible. That pendulum swung down—and stopped inert at the vertical. Not one fraction further could it be forced.

Defeated, with reason and courage ebbing, I can only remember drawing back again behind that sofa, from which superficially safe position I must have dazedly lived through the forty-five or so minutes that still separated me from midnight.

Midnight. When eerily and without fuss, the pendulum tocked free, the second hand notched forward, and the minute and hour hands slid silently round to resurrect time and start

a new day.

I am not ashamed to confess that I slept little. Nor that I did not switch off a single light until full sunshine could flood the room.

My hostess brought in the breakfast, at once asking with a jerk of her head: "And what about that?"

"As you said," I replied flatly, adding with some petulance: "I just don't understand it."

"Perhaps there are some things we just aren't intended to understand," she suggested opaquely. Then, suddenly more cheerful: "But like us, you'll soon get used to it."

She was wrong.

Admittedly I quickly overcame my awe and that prickling fear, but the damned clock was always there all the same. By day it wasn't so bad, but once the autumn dark and the drawn, heavy curtains isolated our world and pressed us closer together, then there was no escaping that insistent, relentless tock-tock onwards towards the inevitability of eleven o'clock. Once, even, I tried stopping the thing, but there was such a lowering weight of reproach in the silence that I actually ran to give it life again.

Work became no longer possible.

So I invited Peter for a week-end. Peter, who is as dry, precise and unimaginative a citizen as you could meet, and whose trade is instruments.

He arrived on a Saturday evening, but I refused to allow him to touch anything until he had actually seen what happened.

At eleven he watched expressionless—after all there is nothing especially unusual in a clock stopping—but at midnight I had the satisfaction of seeing him start and exclaim, as the pendulum moved. Then he froze, while the hands went into their quick, smooth circuit.

"God, but that must be quite a gadget!" he ejaculated, moving forward and peering into the shadowy mechanism. He shook his head regretfully. "It's damn tempting, but we'd better leave it till we've got daylight. It could be finicky work."

The whole morning was devoted to dismantling the clock.

It was without fault or modification.

In the afternoon it was cleaned, oiled and reassembled.

At eleven, we stood and watched.

And the clock ran on. Just as any other clock would.

"Well, whatever it was we seem to have shifted it," Peter commented cheerfully. "Dirt, or something out of alignment, I suppose. They're funny things, clocks."

Next morning he gave me a lift up to London. I made some vague excuse about having to go to a library, because his engineer's mind could never have understood that niggling something that was compelling me towards Battersea. To the Sundown Home, to have this thing out with Mr. Carter.

"I wonder if I might see Mr. Carter?" I asked the wispy little person who came to the door.

Obviously for some reason embarrassed, she drew back. "Are you a relative perhaps, or a friend?"

"Neither really. It's just a personal matter. If you would tell him it's about a clock."

She blinked several times before making up her mind. "It's . . . it's very sad," she quavered, "but I'm afraid Mr. Carter died last night. At eleven o'clock."



OUT OF THIS WORLD

CARLTON L. TRANCHELL

*The imprisoned energy seemed to grow more and more
restless and cried out to be released*

Illustrated by Buster

ACCORDING to the beliefs and traditions of the little village community to which I belonged, there were several deities in the local pantheon who had no particular role to play in the scheme of things and were destined to spend their days in restless and purposeless activity. Such deities were consequently looked upon by everyone in the village as fair game for their own private selfish ends.

My nearest neighbour in the village was a man named Romanis who had devoted his whole life to the study of the "black" arts. It was he who initiated me into the mysteries that enabled the sages of old to gain control over these hapless denizens of another world and even compel them to do man's bidding. Under his guidance I soon acquired a working knowledge of the techniques involved in invoking the aid of the gods, as these practices are euphemistically referred to in necromantic circles. In course of time I was able to reel off from memory, with the ease of an expert, charms and incantations which had not even been committed to writing but had been handed down the ages through the medium of oral tradition.

And so it came to pass that I decided one day to embark upon a voyage of discovery that for courage and endurance would have matched the exploits of the ancient Greek heroes. I was determined to try my hand at tuning in to the spirit realm and contacting, if possible, one of these supernatural beings. Any doubts or misgivings I may have had about my chances of success vanished when I was able to extract, after much en-

treaty and persuasion, an assurance from Romanis of his active support and co-operation.

Elaborate preparations were necessary for the "poojahs" or offerings that had to be kept up for twenty-one consecutive days. Flowers were required in abundance, at least five varieties of them. Fruits and sweet-meats came next, also not less than five kinds of each. A room in Romanis' house was consecrated and set apart for my use. A life-sized statue of the deity whose aid I had decided to invoke stood in a corner of the room. There were garlands around its neck and flowers before its feet. On either side the statue stood the traditional brass lamps, their founts filled with cocoanut oil.

At last everything was in readiness for the big moment. After anointing my head with sacred oil I donned a silken robe (which is the vestment appropriate for such rituals) and entered the chamber precisely at the stroke of midnight. I locked the door and seated myself on the carpet of flowers in what is known to the initiated as the "lotus" posture.

The ceremony of invocation which followed consisted almost entirely of the charms and incantations referred to at the beginning of this narrative. These were chanted in a prescribed order and in strict rotation. Correct intonation, which was the means by which the word-sounds were transformed into vibrations of a desired pitch and intensity, was a key factor in the whole operation. These vibrations in turn eventually merged together to form some kind of a magnetic field where the spirit forces would be trapped and held in captivity.

One effect that the chanting seemed to have was to beget in me a heightened consciousness of my surroundings. Within the chamber the pale yellow glow of the oil lamps cast multiple shadows on the walls while the inky blackness of the night stood sentinel outside the windows, ready to pounce on me if the lights went out. The air was heavy with the scent of camphor. I shivered slightly as though someone had "walked over my grave". Then, strange inexplicable sounds began to mingle with the incantations that poured from my lips. At first they were little chortling sounds that seemed to suggest amused

contempt on the part of the gods at my impudence. As the night wore on they gradually changed into deep groans that had an unearthly sepulchral quality about them. When I refused to be intimidated the noises ceased abruptly.

It was dawn when I put up the shutters on my first night's vigil. Romanis had warned me that any loss of the psychic energy generated in me during these seances could have very serious consequences for me. To protect me from such dangers he had provided me with a special amulet with instructions that I should wear it next to my skin at all times, except during the actual ceremony of invocation. It was intended to serve as a kind of tourniquet, both symbolically as well as metaphysically. I carefully secured the tiny silver pill-shaped case to my waist and returned home only to fall into a deep sleep the moment my head touched my pillow.

When I woke up it was already midday. I spent the intervening hours till midnight in a frenzy of speculation. What new surprises would the second session have in store for me? I tensed myself mentally in readiness for the event. As it turned out, however, I was disappointed to find that the second night's manifestations were an almost exact duplication of the first. There was the boost to the subliminal consciousness about which I have commented earlier and the same weird noises that were obviously intended to distract my attention and frighten me away. Apart from these there was nothing new to report.

Nor were the sessions that followed thereafter calculated to encourage me to persevere with the experiment. It was a severe testing time for me. Nearly two weeks passed by and nothing happened to compensate me for the grinding routine that had to be kept up almost ceaselessly, minute by minute and hour by hour. Could it be, I asked myself, that I had ventured forth on a fool's errand after all? I had almost begun to despair of success when suddenly, as if in answer to my thoughts, things "livened up" once again. The imprisoned energy seemed to grow more and more restless and cry out to be released. The atmosphere was indescribably eerie. The lights flickered vio-

lently without any apparent cause. Voices from the void rumbled in my ears, and at the windows shadowy faces grimaced at me through the blackness of the night.

At this distance of time I cannot recall my experiences clearly enough to give a detailed account of all that transpired during this period. Suffice it to say that it soon became abundantly clear to me that no one could succeed in a trial of strength of this nature unless he had the courage and determination to withstand a protracted ordeal of terror. The fact that I had not panicked at any stage was obviously a point in my favour for, as the days went by, the unpleasant manifestations gradually diminished in intensity until they finally disappeared altogether and never returned to trouble me. Thereafter new and undefiled sense of mystery pervaded the atmosphere. Sweet music filled the air. The fragrance of jasmine and frangipanni continually assailed my nostrils. A luminous glow also seemed to proceed straight from the heart of the statue, as if to assure me that the god himself had begun to smile upon my endeavours.

In sharp contrast to the vagueness of my recollections during the early days of the experiment, the details of the final stage are engraved upon my memory with a vividness of its own. When I entered the chamber on the nineteenth day—with only two more days to go—a strange hush fell over the place. I sat down on the ground as was my wont and resumed my incantations. In a matter of seconds I became transfixed in a rapture of devotion. I gazed ecstatically on the statue of the god which seemed to grow larger and more luminous with each passing moment. A feeling of weightlessness encompassed me, causing my whole body to vibrate, and I was drawn by some strange magnetic force closer and closer towards the statue.

This new and reverent mood, I felt sure, was a sign that the end of the trail was in sight. Any moment now, I said to myself, the final act in the drama should unfold itself before my eyes. It did so, but not in the way I expected things to turn out. Before I could speculate further there was a sudden loud



banging on the door of the chamber. A voice called out to me, it was the voice of Romanis. My immediate reaction was one of impotent rage. Why should my "guru" of all persons have chosen that particular moment to favour me with a visit? Even as I was trying to figure out an answer to these questions the banging started all over again. This time there was an urgent and desperate quality about it. I leapt to my feet and rushed to the door. In my haste I forgot all about the warning that Romanis had given me about the dangers of leaving the chamber for even an instant without the protection afforded by the amulet he had provided me.

I opened the door and found Romanis standing outside, looking anxious and worried. He did not speak but beckoned to me with his hands. I followed him slowly and reluctantly. I

felt instinctively that something was terribly wrong and that I was now at the mercy of some powerful agent whose wrath I had incurred. In an agony of indecision I cast a backward glance at the chamber whence I had emerged. There, framed in the doorway, stood a black monstrous figure. From its large protruding eyeballs and cavernous nostrils leapt tongues of flame that reached out to where I stood. Fear, uncontrollable fear, seized me. I involuntarily stretched out a hand for the comforting feel of Romanis' presence, but—horror of horrors! —I found myself clutching at the empty air. I was alone.

Simultaneously a blinding flash of light seemed to explode in my face and I mercifully lost all consciousness.

When I came to I was lying on a bed in Romanis' house. He was chanting some stanzas that fell on my fevered spirit like gentle rain. He had, of course, come nowhere near me on that fateful night. The loud banging on the door and Romanis' pleadings were all hallucinatory effects produced in my mind by an enraged deity whose divine foresight had enabled him to predict that in my confusion I would overlook the necessity to arm myself with the precious talisman that Romanis had provided me. Fool that I was I had walked blindly into the trap. All that happened thereafter could only be interpreted as the revenge of a god whose personal freedom had been threatened by me.

When I failed to turn up at home as usual after the seance that night, my parents brought the matter to Romanis' notice. A search party was organised in the village. It lasted two days but there was not the slightest trace of Romanis' errant disciple. It was then that Romanis decided as a last resort to seek the aid of a god himself.

On this occasion the god condescended to oblige, perhaps because Romanis' intentions were infinitely more honourable than mine. By some strange coincidence—or was it poetic justice?—it was the same god who had so recently turned the tables on me who came to Romanis' aid. He led Romanis to a neighbouring forest where I was discovered wandering about in a delirium, muttering incoherently to myself.

THE PURGATION

DAVID BARTLETT

*He awoke to a world where the only
motivation was pain*

AS soon as the increasing shadows had merged into comforting darkness, the young rat lurking in the rockery came cautiously down, and crept across the yard. He had been lured there many times before by the exciting smells that promised food, but had always gone away hungry. Not yet old enough to have learned the extreme cunning employed by his kind in foraging, he was often ravenous, as he was that night. His instinct told him that the place where the light was, and where the smells originated, would hold danger for him. This time, though, one particular smell was almost enough to overpower instinct; such a promise of satisfaction as he had never quite known, before.

Having reached the deep shadow of the kitchen wall, he paused for a while, crouched low, invisible, to allow every tiny, alerted nerve to settle. Then he sat bolt upright, concentrating most of that nervous energy into his continually twitching nose; trying to pinpoint the one, fascinating smell among the many others. The moment he located it, he moved, gliding along towards the far end of the wall, still keeping close in to the absolute darkness. At the kitchen door he stopped, tremulous for a moment, afraid of the slit of light. He sniffed about suspiciously. Most of the smells were coming, with the light, from under the door. But the one he was following was farther on still; a promise of actual, physical food away from this place where the light was. Extreme hunger conquered the instinct that said "run", and he climbed on to the step to venture across it, palpitating with apprehension. At the far end he gave

way to the instinct, momentarily, by darting, quick as a flash, for the nearest hole, the drain.

The plop! plop! of the water from the waste pipe halted him. Was this danger? "No", replied instinct, at once. This was the farthest he had ever come across the yard, however, and he was still nervous. He lurked in the angle between wall and drain mounting, while the quaking nerves settled again. When he was fully recovered, he found that the saliva had started to run from his jaws. That wonderful smell was everywhere. Suddenly his hunger canalised every other instinct into itself, possessing him with a burning desire to find this food as quickly as possible. He scurried on, across the drain, along the wall again, and around the corner of the building.

Appended to the kitchen was a small coalshed, at the bottom of the coalshed door was a tiny hole, and from that hole the smell was coming in great, powerful waves. Impelled by the monstrous desire that had become instinct, he scrabbled, squeezed and fought his way through the hole. Inside was the same pitch-darkness that was to his liking. The unceasing nose soon found out the little dish of grains, and he fell upon it.

He ate and ate, gorging himself with the stuff, filling his empty stomach to more than repletion, scrambling about eagerly as he wallowed in that glorious, never-to-be-forgotten flavour. Such food, surely, as a rat only comes across once, in his life. He only stopped when the bowl was empty, and he was certain that not one crumb remained. Sitting up on his haunches, he carefully wiped his mouth with his busy little paws, making sure that all was scrupulously clean, and that the last particle was eaten.

The promise of satisfaction had been more than fulfilled. He was bloated by that tremendous meal. Now desire released its hold on instinct, and instinct alerted the nerves, again. He must find the safest possible place to sleep it off. Instinct told him that he would not get through the hole in the door in his present condition, and led him to the hole in the wall between the kitchen and the coalshed, instead. He crawled into it, and found that it led directly into the cavity between the bricks. Someone

had obligingly cleared away the rubble for a short distance, making a path to a neat little nest. It was made of scraps of paper, pieces of wool, cardboard, fluff, hair—anything, in fact, that might be filched from an ordinary rubbish bucket. By now he was starting to grow lethargic, and instinct failed to define a familiar scent that hung about there. He only paused for a moment's unease, therefore, before he crept into the nest, curled his tail over his whiskers, and fell fast asleep.

He awoke to a world where the only motivation was pain. Pain that originated in his abdomen, burning like fire. Pain that spread outward along every nerve, possessing him entirely, until his tiny frame could not stand it. Now the alkaline poison, contrived for the purpose, started its work. That irresistible food, which he had eaten so eagerly, began to gnaw at him in return, slowly but certainly eroding his entrails.

He squirmed about, twisting and turning his body into every possible contortion to relieve that hideous, deadly pain. It was not to be relieved, though, except of itself. The source of the nerves, the brain, overwhelmed at last by more impulses than it could manage, set up a temporary catalepsy. He twitched, and lay still, not yet dead nor even fully unconscious, but paralysed enough for the pain to have ceased for a while. Numb, vague, emptied of all sensation, he lay there until consciousness started to return. With it came palpitations, again, and an impalpable desire.

Dimly he was able to realise that someone was coming along the cavity. A final spark of instinct put out a warning signal. Slowly and laboriously he managed to sit up, and lumber down from the nest. But he was too late; the owner of the nest, a large she-rat followed by six baby rats appeared, returning from their first expedition outside the cavity. While the baby rats stood back, she came straight for him, bristling with anger at this threat to her territorial rights, her fangs bared, ready to kill.

For a moment the two rats crouched before each other. The she-rat was hissing and spitting in her fury. The young male rat stared listlessly at her vicious face, bewildered and bemused,

Perhaps this was danger; but in some way she was connected with this strange new desire he felt, also. Then all at once he was seized with an almighty paroxysm of pain which caused him to squeal aloud. Instantly the she-rat sprang upon him. Submitting to her, reversing the laws of nature completely, he knew that this was the gratification of the desire. He hardly felt her fangs meet in his throat; his last sensation was his first moment's ecstasy, and the oblivion put a merciful end to the twisted, tormented creature he had become.

Having made sure he was dead, the she-rat bundled the babies into the nest, and gave an object lesson in purifying their quarters by dragging the still quivering body to the hole, and pushing it out. Then she came back and cleared up. *Her* instinct warned her of possible contamination, and *her* instinct had to do the work for the seven of them.

Mr. Jackson, whose wife, Mary, had found slight traces of a rat near her rubbish bucket, opened his coalshed door early in the morning, and discovered a small, stiff corpse. He gave a grunt of satisfaction, scooped it up on his garden spade, and deposited it into his incinerator.

"Well, we caught our rat," he told Mary at the breakfast table. "That poison is good stuff. It must have killed him as soon as he'd eaten it, I'd say."

"Do you mind, dear, over breakfast?" replied Mary.



CRY OF THE GULLS

JOHN HENRY BEAMER

Helen was lying spreadeagled . . .

THE day was hot, but there was a wind blowing in off the sea. It was the kind of wind which blew down the long whip grass covering and overflowing the sand hills, and whirled up the sugary, gritty sand into one's face.

It didn't disturb me even though it blew up my short mini dress to reveal my thin blue briefs beneath, and it certainly did not bother me to know that I was alone, that there was not a soul in sight and I had the hills all to myself.

I tossed back my long, blonde hair over my shoulders and tramped through the grass, my flat heeled sandals making the going springy and trouble free.

The sea stretched before me and, despite the wind, was as calm as the proverbial mill pond and except for the gentle hush of the waves breaking-up on the shore there was no sound to break the heavy and oppressive silence.

True, now and then the gulls whirled inland high over my head with wild, raucous cries, but even they did not disturb me. The sky was very blue and with not one cloud to interfere with its overall sleek smoothness.

I hummed to myself as I moved forward down towards the cliff-top path. On my way I idly bent and picked up a large rock, balanced it on the palm of my hand and tossed it from one hand to the other. It felt heavy and unweildy, but in the end, I clenched it tight in my right hand and continued on my way.

The gulls cried fiercely and sometimes sadly, even plaintively, and well they might, I thought savagely, considering the things they must have witnessed in the past and would do in the near future. I smiled to myself.

The promised railing to fence off the more dangerous part of the cliff path, although agreed upon many times over the years

by the rural council, had still not been placed in position, and though a danger notice was in evidence, few people heeded its warning.

"You must remember, Clare," I recalled my father saying long past, when I was only ten years of age, "after what happened to your dear mother, you are not to go near the cliff path, is that understood?"

I remember I nodded and made my promise.

My mother had fallen to her death from that very path and I had never forgotten the hullaballo it caused, and how it drew attention to the dangerous crumbly nature of the cliff path. I also recalled my father's great distress and of his anxious fear that I should not be made unhappy by the funeral of my mother, and how he had packed me off to stay with an aunt.

"Just keep her as long as you can." I remember him saying to my aunt Ellen. "It will help her to forget our loss, our very very great loss."

The trouble was—I stopped and stared up into the face of the sun—I had not forgotten, and although in later years I was sent away to a boarding school, I still did not forget, for the truth was, on the day of my mother's accident, I had been playing alone among the sand hills and I had witnessed her fall.

It was something I could not tell anyone, and I did not even tell my father, and I certainly did not confide in Helen, his second wife, whom he married a few years later.

He—that is my father, earnestly desired that I should call Helen "mother" but this I resolutely refused to do. He found this perverseness on my part difficult to understand, and in fact still did. Helen, however, did not appear to mind one way or the other, and as I had grown older she did not interfere with me in any way, and her attitude towards me remained as ever, cold, aloof, and with a faint air of sarcastic amusement. We did not care for one another and we did not attempt to hide the fact, and as the years passed, my dislike turned to bitter hatred.

The wind whipped up the sand into my face and eyes, so that for a moment I could not see. I blinked, wiped my face with the

flat of my hand and walked on.

I was now eighteen. Helen was about thirty-eight, I judged her to be, and very agile. She liked walking across the sand hills and of recent years she had, it seemed, become positively obsessed with taking long, lonely walks and of walking along the cliff path and sitting on a rock staring out over the sea. She would sit like this for over an hour at a time. I had noted this passion of hers, and without her knowing it, I had followed her on many occasions, but it was not until the summer of this year I had decided my father would be better off without her. The wind whistled through my teeth as I opened my mouth to laugh, and quickly I shut it again and slid down through the long grass with the rock still in my hand.

Helen was sitting on a boulder staring out over the sea as I knew she would be. She glanced up as I slowly walked towards her.

"What are you doing here?" she said, and I had the feeling as I stared into her dark, restless eyes, she was already suspicious of me. Perhaps, I smiled inwardly, it was her so called feminine intuition getting to work.

I held the rock behind my back.

"The same as you," I answered, "just enjoying the sunshine."

The gulls screamed in over our heads; the tide, now on the turn, was rushing back away from the sharp, smooth-edged rocks below, the sand beneath, stretched as far as the eye could see, virgin sand, dark as brown chocolate.

I stared up at the sun now settled just above the curving bosom of the sea.

"I didn't know you ever came down here," she said and rose to her feet.

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me," I said maliciously.

"Evidently," she said coldly and turned away. Her back towards me. My heart thudded for one brief second, and I felt as though I was going to choke and then just as suddenly I was as cold as the wind in winter. There was not a soul about.

I heard her scream as she went toppling over the edge of the

cliff, a scream which echoed and re-echoed and was borne upwards and inland on the back of the wind, a cry which mingled with the harsh cry of the gulls, and then like a radio quickly turned off, all was quiet.

I moved forward to the edge of the crumbling path and stared down. Helen was lying spreadeagled over the spur of a rock, and like one of my rag dolls from which the sawdust had been emptied, her head hung down sideways.

I stood there, conscious of the wind once again whipping up my mini dress. I felt no excitement, no feeling of sickness or anything else, only a desire to laugh and go on laughing. I turned away and it was then I saw the man with the binoculars at the top of the hill and he staring straight down at me. I knew he must have seen what had happened.

I walked away and quickly ran across the sand hills. The sun was now at my back.

The stranger, a holidaymaker, had seen something of what had happened, it appeared, for despite what my father said and his protests, the police came and took me away.

They questioned me for what seemed hours on end, but I said I had never been near the sand hills. This, I could see, they did not believe, but I didn't care, to be honest, what they believed. It was only when one of them, a little older than the rest, stared down at me and pushed his face almost into mine, I felt a little revolted at his attitude and the fact that his breath was fouled with cigarette smoking.

"Now why not be honest, miss," he said, "and admit the truth. You *were* down on the sand hills at the time of your stepmother's death because you were seen there, so why not tell us so, and also admit that you in fact, hit your stepmother over the head with this rock which we have here and which you dropped after you had killed her?"

"No!" I suddenly lost my cold iciness, "I didn't do anything of the kind, I keep telling you so. It is true I intended to hit her with the rock, but I didn't, I didn't at all . . ." Like the gulls I wanted to cry and go on crying—"I simply pushed her over the cliff like I once saw my father push my mother over. . . ."

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CROOKS IN BOOKS



A review of some recent mystery and detective books

"THE LAST CHECK-POINT", by John Quigley (Collins, £1.50p. 30s.).

Justifiably this can be described as a powerful book for it tells of international power politics with Russian, German and British interests in conflict. Ideologies motivate the principal characters and cause desperate antagonisms. The scenes are set chiefly in that sombre storm-centre of conflicting interests, Berlin; a surprise kidnapping, though, switches the reader to a meeting with the cold, calculating men of Moscow.

All might have been well for the new First Secretary if he had been as negative as he was thought. Instead power gave opportunity to commence a policy of political free-thought

which made him a marked man. Dangerous too was his love for Margaret Sloane; as a young American and a political writer she brought both herself and Eisler under deep suspicion.

Against the background of high-level intrigue and plotting the individual characters stand out sharply . . . Eisler, becoming strained almost beyond endurance; Margaret, loving and apprehensive; secret police chief Bahr who is physically deformed and has also "a limp in his mind" and bodyguard Kander, trained to kill soundlessly but so lonely that he seeks aid through a marriage bureau.

Like it or not, we live in an age of cold wars and hot lines and this book shows what happens when human beings are involved in international dramas.

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Dominic Devine

DEAD TROUBLE

The casual pick-up of rich novelist's daughter was carefully planned, but its results were unexpected. *February*

Andrew Garve

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Bill Smith was a successful sales executive until he became a man on the run. But the Greek cruise he took to evade his pursuers led to unexpected complications. *March*

Roy Lewis

ERROR OF JUDGMENT

Inspector Crow, investigating the death of the Principal's secretary, finds his suspicions veering wildly against the background of student unrest in a Polytechnic. *March*

Martin Russell

DEADLINE

A seaside town in the grip of a homicidal maniac provides a local reporter with his grimmest dead-line. *March*

£1.25 (25s) each

"THE MAN WHO WALKED ON DIAMONDS", by James Quartermain (*Constable Crime*, £1.25p. 25s.).

Sitting in a super-executive office with slick Scandinavian furniture and a salary of £8,000 a year is a splendid way in which to start a new job. When the job is that of Security Chief to a diamond firm of international standing it also provides an excellent way in which to start a story of theft and murder. Throughout, the Chief himself with his darkly-appropriate name of Raven tells the tale; he does it in words as clinically calm and almost dispassionate as those of a surgeon describing an operation which in fact means life or death to the person under the knife.

In remarkable contrast to Raven is his enemy, the blond, outstandingly well-built man who Raven christens sardonically Mr. Universe—but who is lacking in a certain manly way which makes him actually more dangerous. Diamonds worth a fortune go across to the Continent in the hands of men whose trustworthiness is at times in as much doubt as the motives of the intending thieves are certain. Raven goes with them and meets danger in open attack and secret assassination attempts. Similarly at risk in certain ways is the sub-

ject of Raven's romantic interest, Venetia, who is fair-haired, slender, attractive of figure and, what is almost tragically unfortunate at one time, a nice person. Much of the action is set in Antwerp and the city comes vividly real and interesting whether in its crooked side streets or in its lush, sophisticated night-life and transvestite parade. There are, too, fields near Liège and for full measure a giant crucifix which plays a striking part in the bizarre climax.

"GHOSTS", by John Edgell (*Wayland*, £1.75p. 35s.).

In this new collection of the supernatural, John Edgell exposes the raw nerves of thirty-two chilling stories to the flickering light of midnight. In addition to his own stories, the author has included eleven of his favourites, by such past masters of the supernatural as Ambrose Bierce, J. Sheridan Le Fanu, and W. W. Jacobs, who is represented by the classic "The Monkey's Paw".

John Edgell's ghosts incline towards malevolence, and do not limit themselves to their traditional haunts of ruined mansion and fog-enshrouded graveyard. His ghosts make themselves eerily felt and feared in other, more horrifyingly commonplace

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HARRAP

situations: the last Underground train, strangely deserted; the phantom window cleaner of a modern office block, the homicidal flickering of a television set in a darkened room, the Number Thirteen bus . . .

John Edgell's stories are based on real experiences and records of the past, and as he unfolds strange tales of eerie murders, terrified minds, and age-old revenge, you get yet again the feeling that someone (or something) is looking over your shoulder. So, if you're not *quite* certain that ghosts don't exist, perhaps you should read this one only during the daytime.

After all, as the author says

in his Introduction, have you ever wondered how many people have *died* since the world began?

"HIGH TIDE", by P. M. Hubbard (*Macmillan*, £1.40p. 28s.).

Mr. Hubbard shouldn't have any trouble at all captivating his rapidly-growing audience with this tense thriller.

Peter Curtis, cursed with a violent temper, has served his sentence for manslaughter, and sets out for the coast alone to make a new life for himself.

The law has dismissed him but soon he realises that others have not. They believe he knows a secret which involves the flash tides and treacherous quicksands of the remote estuary at Lere-mouth. Why was Evan Maxwell, the man Curtis killed in anger, driving so fast that night four years previously? What was the significance of his last words?

Peter Curtis is as curious to know as his unseen enemies. Constantly aware he is being watched, his stealthy investigations amid the quicksands lead him into the secrets of two very different houses, and two very different women.

When there is a murder he is aware his enemies are closing in at last. The prize at stake becomes clear, and Curtis meets

the challenge. However, ultimately it is the rising tide that has the last word, trumping the treachery and violence of the human antagonists.

The author's subtle, understated prose, and reflective style make all the more effective the finely-maintained tension with which he leads us to the terrifying climax. If you know his writing already, you hardly need me to tell you to read this one. His narrative is cool, but his ability to intrigue and fascinate is exceptional.

"AUTUMN OF A HUNTER", by Pat Stadley (*Collins Crime Club*, £1.25p. 25s.).

This is a book which, as the blunt but striking expression has it, has "fire in its belly". That's true for two reasons. First, there is the vivid, compelling style of writing; second, into the story comes the crackling roar of a terrible forest fire. Really, there are three tales and three separate sets of characters playing their individual parts and all these are skilfully mingled into a integrated whole. There is Martha Cole on a camping trip with her husband and hunted by a remorseless hired killer. There are forest rangers watching with grim-eyed concentration for a wisp of smoke that may swell

into an inferno. And there is a beautiful, sleek creature of the wild, a puma.

In richly colourful words the author describes scenes and action in Los Angeles, the Sierra, Sacramento and along a great traffic highway. The human people and the great animal are all described with insight and with sympathy—except for the wicked man carrying the gun and, by his actions and words, he himself builds up abhorrence and dread.

Pat Stadley has been a newspaper reporter and her experience in this field gives her story factual strength. She has also part-owned a trucking business and the reality and excitement of the highway and roadside halt scenes benefit greatly from this. In all, Nature shows up more favourably than mankind but with suspense stories it is often evil that really makes the tale one to be told.

"BLOOD MONEY", by Thomas B. Reagan (*John Long*, £1.25p. 25s.).

Moving at a breathtaking pace the story tells of Earl Boulton's plan to rob a bank, helped by his pretty wife Anita with her blonde hair and Slavonic cheekbones. The story accelerates with un-

believable speed as cunning preparations develop into exciting action. But complications arise; for one, a police car rushes too fast towards a blazing blockade car and for another, Earl's accomplice Danny who is big, tough and, it turns out, not as simple as he looks, springs a surprise.

Then Earl, known by now as the Mad Dog killer, is on the run—desperate, callous and violent. His flight and varied hiding-places bring him into brutal conflict with tough young punks who visit his motor-camper and into amorous contact with an only-too-willing and far from virtuous woman. Then he meets the completely contrasting Bobbi-Jo, hitch-hiking from the hick country. She has hands red from farm-work and a body surprisingly white and shapely.

All this leads to a climax which, understandably as the story has been consistently incandescent, is explosive.

"DOLLY AND THE DOCTOR BIRD", by Dorothy Halliday (Cassell £1.75 p. 35s.).

This is the third extravaganza in the series featuring the redoubtable Johnson Johnson the travelling artist with his bifocals, battered briar pipe, and yacht

Dolly, which has already seen come and go the *Singing Bird* and the *Cookie Bird*.

This time, with lots of sunshine, plenty of arsenic (for *hors d'oeuvres*) in and around Nassau, it's the turn of the Doctor Bird. That's Dr. B. Douglas MacRannoch, who starts off like Scotland's own contribution to Unisex, as she herself observes once things have hotted up quite considerably.

Her father, the irascible 45th Chief of the Clan MacRannoch, has been exiled to the Bahamas for the sake of his health, so she abandons her research career to go with him. Plain sailing, or rather, plain flying, till they reach Kennedy Airport. There, she gives Sir Bartholomew Edgecombe emergency treatment for what was presumed to be a gastro-intestinal infection.

It wasn't. It was deliberate arsenic poisoning, and person or persons unknown immediately made it clear they did not want the Doctor Bird sticking her nose into their affairs again. For her own good, of course.

That's the beginning of the end of her professional dedication, and almost as much for her life. The first attempt on Sir Bartholomew is just the prelude to riotous escalation of the whole affair as she and Johnson ignore all warnings to stay out of the arena. It is not long before she discovers

that (a) she is deeply embroiled in international espionage, and that (b) she has been missing out on all the pleasures of life in the past.

It is soon apparent that her pleasures are as dangerous as her business, and the complications of espionage pall before the problems posed by the men about her. But she is nothing if not very competent, the action is nothing if not headlong, and the locale is very, very exotic. Don't get into this if you've got work to do, because you'll find yourself doing overtime if you do!

"HALF A BAG OF STRINGER", by Philip McCutchan (Harrap, £1.50p. 30s.).

Hubert Paxton is the one minister in the government who can persuade the Gnomes of Zurich to make an utterly vital loan. But he has been assassinated in the remote highlands of Scotland before the delicate negotiations have been concluded.

The world must be made to believe the great financier is still alive, so the deal can go through. The assassin himself is dead, and the news is hushed up. Enter Paul Shearing, the dead minister's exact double. £5,000, a few well-placed threats (to which he does not take kindly), and Kirsty

Mason, Paxton's ex-secretary, do the trick, and he finds himself upholding the deception round the Swiss conference tables – until an attempt on his life forces him to flee to Australia.

Here, Shearing becomes involved in kidnapping and murder, in the mystery of innocuous Miss Stringer and with the magic of Dead Charlie, the aborigine who looks like a walking corpse. The fatal courage of Kirsty Mason enables him to continue the deception, throughout a desperate and perilous flight across the Outback, ending with his rescue off the coast.

Philip McCutchan writes rough-hewn and vivid prose, while the pace of this eminently readable thriller effectively carries one over the occasional implausibility. The character of Paul Shearing in particular is well-drawn, and all-in-all, it's a worthy successor to the author's many other thrillers.

"SLEEP AND HIS BROTHER", by Peter Dickinson (*Hodder and Stoughton*, £1.40p. 28s.).

Two successive wins in open contests for the Golden Dagger of the Crime Writers' Association gives the author a flying start in claims for reader-interest. Here, his reluctant hero, the un-

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They suffer from an unidentified disease which makes them pass slowly but inexorably into a condition of sleep; yet, while doing so it gives them the power of communication by thought-transference.

Described with eerie and compelling effect the dream-like condition of the children transmits itself from the printed page with a near-nightmarish effect. Against this the grown-ups are sharp and astringent, their penetrating quality heightened by the whimsy of their names. There are the doctors, Ram and Rue, or Rameses Silver and Wild Rue Kelly. There is Doll and the woman usually referred to as poor Posey, the secretary.

Under treatment in the once-fine house of a charitable organisation the children dream on while Pibble tries to find the secret force which causes the millionaire financier of the charity and its staff to do their work. Is it dedication to the needs of young humanity—or is there something else, perhaps a maniac ambition, behind it?

"THE MURMANSK ASSIGNMENT", by James Pattinson (*Robert Hale*, £1.10p. 22s.).

When a trawler leaves Hull to nose through icy waters lighted only by the weird glow of the Aurora Borealis it is going fishing—with a difference. The big "catch" is a Polish scientist, expert in germ warfare, and Paul Wyatt who is hard-up and adventurous is going to "spring" him secretly from Murmansk. Helping him is Hansen, a craggy hard-hitter with two soft spots, women and liquor. Getting into Murmansk isn't easy; getting out seems at times to be impossible. There is a spine-chilling, Hitchcock-like quality in the telling of the tale. Escape from one trap leads only to even greater danger in another and readers will find their sighs of relief changing almost instantly into gasps of dismay.

The many cliffhanger situations are described in a series of taut close-ups of verbal claustrophobic type; reading about them makes one feel as confined by danger as the characters themselves.

The ending adds considerably to the interest for the plot develops unexpectedly and a counter-plot is introduced by the author with telling effect. And while Wyatt is seeking for escape for the scientist he finds something he didn't expect—romance.

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